

## *La Francophonie*

**Professor Margaret Majumdar, University of Portsmouth**

### Keywords

assimilation; colonialism; decolonization; francophone; Francophone Summits; the French Empire; post-colonial world

### **Q. What is *la Francophonie*?**

A. In its original sense, *la Francophonie* refers quite simply to the French-speaking populations of the world, although it is sometimes also extended to describe the countries or regions, which they inhabit. In contemporary discourse, however, it also denotes an institutional apparatus, of fairly recent origin, which has been put in place to constitute a framework for relations between the different parts of the francophone world. It also denotes a characteristic set of ideas, which evolved essentially in the wake of the formal break-up of the French Empire, and which tend to express a more or less idealized notion of how the relations between metropolitan France and its former colonies, as well as their reciprocal relations with each other, should be organized.

### **Q. What were the circumstances of its birth?**

A. The first known use of the term '*Francophonie*', to denote the world-wide community of speakers of the French language, was by the French geographer Onésime Reclus (1837–1916) in his *France, Algérie et Colonies* (1880). However, it was not until the early 1960s that *la Francophonie* really came into being, and, first and foremost, as an intellectual movement in the immediate aftermath of decolonization. Its precise birth is usually identified as the publication of a special issue of the review *Esprit* in 1962, to which several leaders of the newly independent nations of the former empire contributed pieces, including Senghor of Senegal, Bourguiba of Tunisia and Sihanouk of Cambodia. These founding fathers of the francophone movement set out a vision of a new community, which would bring together all those peoples who had previously been part of the French Empire on the basis of what they had in common – the shared French language and culture, with which were associated a heady mix of universal Enlightenment ideals, based on the Rights of Man and on the values of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In other words, a highly idealized, almost spiritualistic, vision of universal brotherhood was proposed for the new post-colonial world; thus, with the end of overt imperialism and colonialism, the stage was set for the effective realization of the old colonial doctrine of 'assimilation' into a community of universal equal rights, which had been hampered by the realities of colonial relations of domination under the empire.

### **Q. How has it developed since?**

A. Unlike the British Commonwealth, which had a clear institutional framework from the outset and a well-defined relationship in respect of the former colonial power, with the British sovereign as its head, the development of francophone institutions took place in a piecemeal fashion and only slowly over many years. Rather, the

strength of *la Francophonie* at the outset was primarily as an intellectual movement, built on the importance and perceived special characteristics of the French language, and the cultural collaboration of those who had a shared heritage. This was, however, its weakness also. Its limitations soon became apparent, particularly as the credibility of the original pretensions to universality of the French language could not be maintained. On the one hand, the world-wide French-speaking community was not only limited in numbers, compared with other language communities; it was also not solely, or even predominantly, based on mother-tongue speakers. Indeed, included in the category of francophones were many who lived in countries where French had been maintained as an official language, or as the language of an elite culture, alongside the mother tongue(s) or other working languages. Over the years, the vision of *Francophonie*, and the corresponding discourse which articulated it, underwent a series of adjustments and often fundamental shifts.

To begin with, its proponents met what was perceived as a growing threat from the increasing hegemony of the English language, and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ culture world-wide, with a straightforward defence of the French language and culture. Increasingly, the argument shifted to the cultural domain, in a defence of the higher, more noble qualities of (elite) French culture, in opposition to the ‘dumbing down’ effect and low quality of vulgar, Americanized mass culture, fast food and branded consumer products (Hollywood, pop music, Disney, Coca-Cola, McDonald’s). The crunch came with the GATT negotiations of 1993, when the French government took up the cudgels to fight for its right to use protectionist trade measures to defend its own cultural interests, in the shape of the *exception culturelle*, not just on behalf of the francophone world but also as the champion of other European countries’ rights to maintain their cultural and linguistic diversity. This was reinforced by the theme promoted through the 1993 Francophone Summit held in Mauritius of ‘Unity in Diversity’.

In this way, the francophone discourse developed from what had originally been the expression of a vision of a universal, homogeneous, linguistic and cultural community to an ever broader defence of diversity and pluralism. It gradually moved from a position of proposing French as a global alternative to English as a universal language, to the defence of French in the name of diversity, including (on the way) a new-found enthusiasm for the different varieties and manifestations of the French language itself, to the defence of the right of other languages and cultures, in the name of cultural pluralism and multi-lingualism.

### **Q. What is the relationship between France and *la Francophonie*?**

A. The initial impulse behind *la Francophonie* came not from France but from intellectuals in the newly independent former colonies, with the backing of francophone Canadians. Although much of the discourse promoting the world-wide ambitions and potential of the French language and the ‘*rayonnement*’ of French culture throughout the planet coincided with the dominant world-view of the French state and its leading political figures, who celebrated the ongoing presence of the French language ‘on all five continents’, France nonetheless showed no inclination, at the outset, to take a leading role in the movement, preferring on the whole to conduct its relations with its former colonies on a bilateral basis, rather than through any multilateral association.

It was only with the election of François Mitterrand to the presidency, in 1981, that the French began to be fully involved with developing the potential of *la*

*Francophonie*, particularly on the institutional front, as a useful additional forum for promoting and defending their global policy interests. Major steps taken were the creation of the television channel TV5 in 1984, as an international vehicle for the propagation of the French language and culture and for the demonstration of its diversity across the francophone world, as well as the organization of the very first Francophone Summit at Versailles in 1996.

With the assessment of the growing importance of the cultural domain as a key area for the assertion and maintenance of French influence on the global level, reinforced by the key catalyst of the 1993 GATT negotiations, the value of *la Francophonie* as a vehicle and adjunct to French policy was increasingly recognized.

In spite of this greater involvement in francophone affairs and willingness to take on more of a leading role, or even perhaps partly because of it, there remains a strong sense that France is not a partner in *la Francophonie* like any other. Indeed, the term '*Francophone*' is still often used to differentiate the 'francophone' world (i.e. outside metropolitan France), particularly in the fields of literature, art and culture generally, though not exclusively, from France itself.

### **Q. What is the main institutional framework of *la Francophonie*?**

A. In the early years, institutional development took place on a piecemeal, sectoral basis, focusing on specific areas of collaboration. The first major francophone institution, AUPELF (*Association des Universités Partiellement ou Entièrement de Langue Française* – now known as AUF, *Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie*) was established in Montreal in 1961, largely on the initiative of the French Canadians, with the aim of fostering academic cooperation. For many years, the most important institution, and the first inter-governmental one, was the ACCT (*Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique* – now known as the *Agence intergouvernementale de la Francophonie*). Set up in 1969, this became *la Francophonie*'s main operating agency, coordinating collaborative activities across the board in the cultural and technological domains. A large number of separate bodies sprang up in particular areas of activity and interest, at both governmental and non-governmental levels, e.g. AIPLF (*Association Internationale des Parlementaires de Langue Française* – now known as APF) founded in 1967, CONFEJES (*Conférence des Ministres de la Jeunesse et des Sports de la Francophonie*) founded in 1969, AFAL (*Association Francophone d'Amitié et de Liaison*) founded in 1974, and many others.

Following the institution of regular Francophone Summits from 1986, a more systematic process of institution-building was initiated, culminating in the decision at the 1997 Hanoi Summit to reinforce the political dimension of *la Francophonie* and establish an over-arching permanent political organizational structure, the OIF (*Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*), with its own Secretary-General. In choosing the former UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, as the first to fill this post, the choice of orientation of the new body towards a broader, more political direction was made clear, and its activities have a wide remit, including not only the cultural sphere, but also in terms of promoting human rights and the development of the democratic process, as well as projects for economic cooperation and development. In many ways, the body appears to be attempting to fulfil some of the functions of an international body like the UN, though with a definite attempt to flag up its radical, even 'subversive' stance – at the Cotonou Summit in 1995, a key slogan was '*Francophonie* will be subversive and imaginative or will not survive!' The last

Summit (Beirut 2002) saw the reinforcement of this line, presenting *la Francophonie* as an alternative, of a radically different type, to other global alliances and partnerships. It also saw the appointment of Abdou Diouf of Senegal, as the second Secretary-General.

**Q. Which countries belong to *la Francophonie*?**

A. The organization has members predominantly in Europe, Africa, North America and South-East Asia. The full list of current and associate members, as well as those with observer status, may be consulted at the OIF website ([www.francophonie.org](http://www.francophonie.org)). It will be noted that members include not only nation-states, but also sub-national entities, such as New Brunswick, Quebec and the Communauté française de Belgique, which have membership rights on their own account, as well as under Canada and Belgium. In recent years, the membership has broadened to include many countries from Eastern Europe, either as full members or associates. This process has coincided with the downgrading of the importance of the French language, as the defining element – now enshrined in the most recent version of the *Charte de la Francophonie*, which no longer specifies that members should satisfy a language requirement. There are several significant absentees. One of France's key former colonies, Algeria, has so far declined to join the organization for ideological reasons. It is also the case that the francophone Caribbean is signally unrepresented in this body, with the sole exception of St Lucia, as the French DOM – Martinique, Guadeloupe and Guiana – do not, unlike Quebec and others, have a seat in their own right, apart from France.

**Key publications by Margaret Majumdar**

'Francophonie: hégémonie, culture et discours', in M. Gontard and M. Bray (eds), *Regards sur la francophonie* (Rennes: Presses de l'Université de Rennes, 1996).

'Language and history in Franco-Algerian relations', in K. Salhi (ed.), *Francophone Studies: Discourse and Identity* (Exeter: Elm Bank Publications, 2000).

'Lutte, parole et résistance dans les textes antillais', in 'Passerelles Francophones: pour un nouvel espace d'interprétation, Vol. II', *Vives Lettres*, 11, Spring 2001: 133–156.

*Francophone Studies: The Essential Glossary* (London: Arnold, 2002).

'The francophone world moves into the twenty-first century', in K. Salhi (ed.), *Francophone Post-colonial Cultures: Critical Essays* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

'La Dialectique de l'écriture', in M. Laronde, *Leïla Sebbar* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003).

**Further reading**

D. Ager, *Francophonie in the 1990's: Problems and Opportunities* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1996).

J. Barrat, *Géopolitique de la Francophonie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).

A. Maugey, *Le Roman de la Francophonie* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1993).

P. Rossillon (ed.), *Atlas de la langue française* (Paris: Bordas, 1995).

K. Salhi (ed.), *Francophone Studies: Discourse and Identity* (Exeter: Elm Bank Publications, 2000).

K. Salhi (ed.), *Francophone Post-colonial Cultures: Critical Essays* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).