

Strong Language

We were surprised when some of our old-stock French friends and acquaintances told us their parents or grandparents had never spoken French. A couple of weeks after our arrival, we were invited to dinner at the home of Bénédicte Rozeron, a thirty-five-year-old systems architect for an insurance company, who was introduced to us by a French friend in Montreal. Over the course of the supper, she mentioned she was from the *pays* Basque and we spent much of the evening on the topic.

There are approximately eight hundred thousand Basques living on each side of the Franco-Spanish border along the Atlantic coast. Nobody knows where the Basques originally came from or exactly how they ended up inhabiting this area. The roots of the *Euskara* (Basque language, in the Basque language) go back at least four thousand years, before Latin was spoken and possibly to the Neolithic age, which would make it one of the oldest languages still spoken today. Although Bénédicte likes playing *pala*, a traditional Basque game similar to squash, she counts herself among France's assimilated Basques, much to her regret. Her grandmother spoke the Basque language and her mother understood it, but Bénédicte can't make out a word of it. She doesn't know why her grandmother didn't transmit the language.

As the evening progressed, we saw for ourselves why Bénédicte never learned Euskara. We asked her why she didn't get her daughter to learn the

Basque language and she replied:

"I wouldn't want my child to lose her French. It's too important. She couldn't function."

Throughout our stay, we met many other old-stock French of Catalan, Provençal, Alsatian, or Breton origins who had exactly the same attitude about their regional language or dialect. Everyone regrets the loss of regional languages but defends the need to speak good French—as if French was fighting a zero sum game against other local languages.

Whenever we returned to North America from France, people often asked us why the French were so obsessed with protecting their language. Although something told us it was really North Americans who were obsessed with the question, there's no denying how vocal and explicit the French are about protecting their language. Language is a national complex in France. Anglo-Americans consider language a tool, but the French regard it as an accomplishment, even a work of art. They love and cherish their language in ways that are almost incomprehensible to English speakers. It's their national monument.

The obsession goes much deeper than grammar and sentence structure. Language was one of the main tools France employed over the centuries to solidify a common identity—thereby reinforcing France's territorial, political, and administrative unity. Efforts to impose a common language go back as far as the time of Charlemagne (742–814 A.D.), French emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, who tried to make the whole empire speak Latin. Later French kings used aggressive, even violent methods to impose the French language—and apparently, they never quite won.

Modern French is a derivative of *Francien*, the language spoken in the Paris region at the beginning of the second millennium. By the fourteenth century, *Francien* was already widespread throughout the kingdom, especially in the cities, because Paris was already an important center of trade. Students flocked to its universities and artists entertained the court.

The process of penetration during that period was very akin to the spread of English today: no one forced French on anyone. The language became important because of the sheer weight of Paris in the French kingdom, and of the French kingdom in Europe. France's population in the

fourteenth century equaled those of England, Germany, Italy, and Spain combined. France's neighbors recognized the French language long before it became the official language of France. Most treaties in Europe were written in French. The language had no real standards, and French borrowed and absorbed words from other languages much like Shakespeare's English.

Six centuries later, Jean-Benoît is a North American native and French speaker. The French spoken in Quebec is as different from Parisian French as American English is from British English, but the numbers and the ratios of the two groups are very different: Americans outnumber the British five to one, whereas the French outnumber Quebecers ten to one. As a consequence, Americans impose their own standards on the English language, whereas Quebecers have to conform to the French norm. Jean-Benoît learned to read and write in French using mostly French dictionaries and reference books, with French examples and French definitions. For instance, if you open a French dictionary of *noms propres* (people's and place's names), the entry for the town of Besançon is followed with the number 45000. This is not the population, but the postal code. And naturally, only the biggest cities of Quebec are listed in the same dictionary—without their postal code.

The reference point of the French language has always been, and will remain, Paris, and Paris still dictates the standard today. This has to do with demography as well as the history of the language after the Renaissance.

The first language ruling of the modern French State took place in 1539. At the time, the French crown was still busy vying for power with members of the aristocracy and the Catholic Church. Looking for ways to chip away at the Church's influence, King François I (1515–47) passed the ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts, which stated that French would be the language of France's tribunals—not Latin, the language of the Church. The same ordinance made French mandatory in all administrative documents, although that rule wasn't widely applied until the French Revolution.

The French poet François de Malherbe (1555–1628) had a decisive influence on the French language because he managed to impose the idea of a "norm." Malherbe convinced a group of followers that France's class of

"honest" men—meaning people of "value" like aristocrats, clerics, and artists—should employ language that was clear, precise, uncorrupted, and followed rules of *bon usage* (correct use). In 1634, Cardinal Richelieu (1585–1642) gave his protection to some of Malherbe's followers. The next year, Richelieu created the *Académie Française*, whose founding goal was to give "undebatable rules to our language, to make it pure, eloquent, and capable of addressing the arts and sciences."

The *Académie* published its first dictionary by 1694. Its work consisted mostly of pruning the language of synonyms and rigidly defining each term so that no two terms had the same meaning. But even before the publication of a French dictionary, *bon usage* was rapidly eliminating French words. François Rabelais (1483–1555) used forty thousand words in the *Gargantua and Pantagruel* cycles. A century later, a playwright like Jean Racine (1639–99) wrote the entire body of his tragedies using about three thousand words. The French are always surprised to hear that there are from five to ten times more accepted words in the English language than in French (they will typically talk about how much "richer" the French language is than English and assume by deduction that French has more words). In French, the boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not are clearly defined and enforced by the *Académie* and the government. In English, there is no body that rules out words.

Starting in the seventeenth century, two French languages actually developed side by side: the language of the court and literature, and the common language, of which we know practically nothing now. French grammarians and language purists became very influential during this period. But they never really succeeded in imposing their standards on the general population. People just refused purism, even people of relatively high standing, like the playwright Molière (1622–73), an intimate of King Louis XIV, who mocked the precious language of the court in his work.

The French Revolution fueled the efforts of the language purists. A 1790 survey of spoken languages showed that half of the French population did not speak or understand French. This was clearly a problem for a regime that proposed making the people sovereign. Henri Grégoire (1750–1831), a priest and Republican cleric of the extreme Left, who

openly decried regional dialects and the influence of foreign languages, demanded that French be taught to the whole nation.

A couple of generations passed before the Abbé Grégoire's demands were met. But French continued to make great progress in the countryside during this period thanks to two seemingly unrelated factors: a road system centered on Paris, and mandatory military service. Because of the road system, most tradesmen had to pass through Paris, and they had to be able to speak and understand the language. Like all branches of the State, the military spoke French. Millions of men in France's mass armies were forced to speak and understand it. After the Revolution, the Villers-Cotterêts ordinance, which made French the legal language for all written documents, was finally applied. The new State also required educated civil servants who could speak French. More and more people entered the school system in the 1830s. Spelling became state business, and the French government started to rule on what was acceptable and what was not.

The *Académie* and the promoters of *bon usage* never succeeded in forcing the French to speak the pure literary form of the language that was their model. The State vilified regional languages and dialects, but artistic schools like the romantics and the naturalists extolled them as "natural" languages. Accelerating economic and social changes also called for a constant redefinition of the norm. New technologies and new ideas called for new words. The process of erasing regional languages was slow. At the end of the nineteenth century, the only people who spoke French in many *communes* were the mayor, the notary, the priest, and the teacher. By 1910, 90 percent of the French understood French, but 50 percent of the population still understood a dialect.

While the idea of language norms is very strong in France, the French have always nurtured a counterculture of dialects that subvert these norms. In the nineteenth century, French criminals developed a language called *Argot* so they could communicate without being understood. Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo were militant defenders of *Argot*—popular characters in their novels spoke in dialects and used colloquialisms rather than the language of *bon usage*. Many *Argot* terms crept into

standard French and are still used, like *mec* (man), *bidule* (thingamajig), or *fric* (money).

Slang exists in all cultures, but the French are famous for building theirs into systems. One interesting case was *Loucherbem*, a slang developed by butchers in Paris markets in the nineteenth century. In *Loucherbem*, the first letter of a word is taken off, replaced with the letter "l," tacked on the end, and followed by *em*, *oche*, or *oque*. *Loucherbem* is the *Loucherbem* word for *boucher* (butcher). Some terms from the slang are still used, like *loufoque*, from *fou* (crazy).

The liveliest form of *Argot* now used is *Verlan*, which is common in the French Arabic ghettos of the suburbs. *Verlan* just reverses the syllables of a word—the term *Verlan* is itself a reversal of the term *l'envers* (reverse). Many *Verlan* words are commonly used, even in the media and publicity. The second generation of Arab immigrants call themselves *les Beurs*, a Frenchification of the Arabic term for "Arab." In *Verlan*, *Beur* is reversed and becomes *Rebeu*. Another common *Verlan* term is *ripou*, which means cop, but is actually *Verlan* for *pourri* (rotten).

Despite the proliferation of *Argot*, language purists have not given up the idea of a norm remains strong in France. In 1997, after the Socialist Party won the legislative elections, a group of high-profile female ministers demanded they be called *madame LA ministre*—a very bold break in tradition. Unlike English and German, there is no neutral gender in French, and titles were customarily masculine. Traditionally, *la ministre* is the minister's wife. And *la mairesse* is the wife of the mayor, *le maire*. A female mayor has always been *madame le maire*.

The battle over these titles was a showdown between France's purists and non-purists. The purists argued that a masculine title refers to the institution. Being summoned by *madame le juge* means you're being summoned by justice (the institution). A summons by *madame la juge* means you're being invited (by the person). Naturally, the *Académie Française* bought this argument and opposed changing the gender of titles. The government appointed a committee to decide, but most people just adopted the change anyway, including the press. Even relatively conservative publications now speak of female ministers or judges as *madame la ministre* and *madame la juge*.

This is the kind of language quarrel you get in the *République*: common usage always wins, but the purists never give in without a fight.

Anglo-American commentators accuse the French of being insular and xenophobic whenever the French government attempts to outlaw the use of English terms in France. Yet when one considers the effort the French government has put into getting rid of its own regional languages, there's nothing remarkable about the fact that it regulates English. Language purism is part of the fabric of France. The old idea of *bon usage* remains very strong, and linguistic innovations of any type are carefully considered before being accepted. Normal French people speak in a way that is far more refined and formal than anything one would hear in North America—either in English or French. The French have fewer words to choose from, but they use more of the ones they have. The hierarchy between oral and written standards is opposite of that of English. Typically, good English writing tends to conform to the spoken word. But the French try to adjust the way they speak to reflect the way they write—or should write.

We found the French remarkably welcoming when it came to housing us, feeding us, helping us out, and becoming our friends, but intolerant when it came to language. As French-speaking foreigners with "exotic" Quebec accents, we got to observe their fastidiousness close up. Sometimes they mocked our Quebec accents. Sometimes they made double-edged compliments—telling us our accents were *mignon* (cute). Sometimes they even tried to imitate us. In television interviews for a special on Quebec singer Céline Dion, her family members were even subtitled (French Canadian TV never subtitles Parisians, even when they are incomprehensible).

Even so, it wouldn't be fair to categorize this behavior as arrogant. We eventually understood that, in France, correcting a person in mid-sentence is not considered impolite, as it is in the Anglo-American world. Jean-Benoît was often corrected for not making the liaison between words. In Quebec French, the silent consonant at the end of words is not always pronounced before a word that starts with a vowel. The French are absolutely manic about liaisons, which can be very elaborate. *Vous essayez d'étirer un élastique trop épais* (you try to stretch too tight an elastic) becomes *Vous*

z'essayez d'étirer un n'élastique trop p'épais. Making every available liaison is a mark of good education in France. Quebeckers can take or leave the liaison, but generally consider it precious sounding.

Julie found herself in an interesting situation. She speaks Quebec French with an English accent, yet the French tended to hear only her Quebec accent. Quebeckers had very little contact with the French for nearly two centuries, from 1763 to about 1940, so the languages, understandably, are quite different. Because Quebec is in direct contact with a predominantly English continent, Anglicisms crept into Quebec French in a different way. Julie discovered this firsthand when she tried to buy a bottle of iced tea at our local bakery on Avenue St-Ouen. Iced tea has been around for a long time in Quebec, long enough for them to just translate it into *thé glacé*. But when Julie asked the French baker for a *thé glacé*, the woman almost dropped her baguettes.

"You mean an *eeese tee*," she said, twisting the English words "iced tea" into something that sounded like certified French.

Julie was in the odd situation of having a Parisian instruct her on how to mispronounce words in her own language. Eventually she got used to that (and she got into the habit of explaining that English was her first language). The French have an irrepressible habit of correcting language use, and they do so indiscriminately. France has dictated the standard of *bon usage* for so long that nobody really questions it. The standard French dictionaries used in Quebec, for instance, are French. Examples for word use refer exclusively to French reality, as seen from Paris. So it's no surprise that Parisian French consider their language to be the standard.

In France there is also a sort of residual belief in the intrinsic genius or superiority of the French language. These days, that prejudice is clearly being fueled by France's rivalry with Anglo-American culture. Many people we met in France, even highly educated ones, spoke to us matter-of-factly about how the French language was infinitely "richer" than English, with a "wider vocabulary." English has approximately five times more words than French, so the argument about richness is definitely open to debate. But the French believe their own story (partly because they do use their language more richly).

Again, the roots of the belief go back centuries. One of the creators of the doctrine of *bon usage*, Dominique Bouhours (1628–1702), a grammarian, wrote that the French language "may be the only one that follows exactly the natural order and that expresses thoughts as they rise to the mind." The idea that the French language was innately superior had triumphed by the eighteenth century, when author Antoine de Rivarol (1753–1801) wrote his *Discours sur l'Universalité de la Langue Française*. He claimed, "Of all languages, the French language is the only one that has an element of probity attached to its genius. Defined, social, and reasonable, it is not only the language of the French, but the language of humanity."

By the nineteenth century, most who learned French disagreed with this kind of chauvinism, but the idea of its superiority still has sway in modern France. What's clearly not debatable is that the French love and value their language and use it with great care. Many people in France simply mistake good language use for an intrinsic quality of the language itself.

You might say the French lack perspective. But all cultures are self-centered. Now that English is the dominant global language (replacing French), it is common to hear or read nonsense like Rivarol's about the genius of the English language.

Interestingly, the British abandoned the idea of creating a French-style English academy after a heated debate over the issue in the eighteenth century. But even if the British had created an academy, their successful colonial policy meant that they would have lost control of it early. Only 10 percent of those who speak English as their mother tongue now live in Britain. English, of course, has its purists too, but there has never been a single authority to enforce good language use. Because so many people speak English in so many different ways, "getting the message through" is the spirit that dominates the use of English today. Contrary to what many French believe, English is not a simple language. As a French *académicien* once put it, English is a language that is relatively easy to speak poorly. The real difference is that, unlike the French, English speakers tolerate poor use of their language.

The French have a complex relationship with English. In pre-revolutionary France, there was actually a wave of Anglomania. During

the French Revolution many political terms were picked up from English, including *gouvernement* and *révolution*—a term that applied only to astronomy prior to the English Revolution of 1688. Yet in the same period there was also a shift against foreign influences in the French language. All European cultures were going through about the same process at the time. The British and the Germans were modifying spellings of foreign words to make them look native. In France, the Abbé Grégoire preached against the use of foreign words and dialects, which was ironic since, by chanting the merits of the Revolution, he was using an Anglicism.

The idea of protecting the language against Anglicisms actually started in Quebec. In a population of seven million now, six million can be considered native speakers of French. This is a very small French pool in a sea of three hundred million English speakers—no other linguistic group has a similar situation except, maybe, Baltic-language speakers with respect to Russian, or Hebrew speakers with respect to Arabic. Starting in the 1960s, Quebec leaders became conscious of the necessity of protecting the French language, and they implemented various policies, including a policy of official bilingualism in Canada. The Quebec government also created a set of language laws that carefully circumscribed the use of the English language on signs, enrollment in English schools, and in public communications. The French followed the trend ten or fifteen years later.

Until the 1970s, the French were very *laissez-faire* with respect to the English language. Oddly, one of the first high-profile initiatives to protect French came from IBM France in 1954. At the time, IBM was trying to popularize the use of computer mainframes. Most cultures adopted a version of the English term in their own language—like *computador* in Spanish or *computer* in German. In French, the first two syllables of the word computer resemble the worst insults imaginable—*con* and *pute* (meaning cunt and whore). So IBM France created its own trademark term, *ordinateur*, which the French government officially adopted ten years later.

The idea of language control oozed in the French political class in the 1970s, mostly as a result of foreign influence from Quebec and French-speaking countries in Africa. In 1975, the National Assembly passed a law making it mandatory to use French in publicity, though the measure didn't

prove very effective in the long-term. In 1992, the Constitution was modified to state that “the language of the Republic is French.” In 1994, a new law modified the publicity law of 1975 and added fines of up to four thousand dollars for companies that didn't use French. More importantly, the new law forbade publicly traded companies and individuals in the service of the State from using any language but French in their communications.

Language rules have always been controversial in France. In the 1990s, the government wanted to forbid the use of English terms outright. The *Conseil Constitutionnel* (Constitutional Court) ruled against such a prohibition, no doubt taking into consideration the realities of daily life in France, where English words abound. Quebeckers, who are very purist about Anglicisms at the official level, constantly reproach the French for using English terms. In reality, each culture just uses different Anglicisms. As one common joke puts it: Quebeckers *parquent* the car in the *stationnement* (parking) while the French *stationnent* in the *parking*.

Legal measures will not stop the French from using English terms. At best, they will slow the process down. One need only walk down a street in Paris or any provincial French city to notice the proliferation of English words and expressions. As Quebeckers, we were surprised to see that French people use English expressions to project a kind of *cachet* or sophistication, much like English speakers use French expressions to project sophistication when they are talking about cuisine, fashion, or even international affairs. The French go to do their *shopping* with their *caddie*. After work, they do their *walking*. Stylish young French businessmen and women speckle their vocabulary with English business terms. The influence of English is evident everywhere American culture is imported. The Belgian fast-food chain Quick sells *les chicken wings*. McDonald's meal deals are called *Best of meals*.

The borrowing of English terms is the source of ceaseless arguments between France's language purists (who reject them) and linguists (who actually welcome them). Linguists argue that French borrows from all languages, so why should there be a stigma attached to *le scanner* or *le shopping*, but none on *le spaghetti* or *Beur*? Half of the basic vocabulary in English

comes originally from old French, not including the more recent adoption of cooking and military vocabulary. At the moment, English dominates the vocabulary of new technology, but that does not pose a threat to the existence of the French language. As the history of the French language shows, ordinary use and fashion eventually prevail over purism, but purists never go down without a fight. (There's more about anti-Americanization in chapter 20.)

Given the French penchant for controlling vocabulary and language usage, it should not come as a surprise that they refuse to hand their culture over to "market forces." Culture in France has always been closely associated with the country's national and international ambitions. François I (1515–47) made French mandatory in dispensing justice, but also created the *Collège de France*, the Royal Library, and a policy of public works, and hired writers as diplomats and high civil servants in his court. Art, for him, was not simply a matter of decoration, but a means of affirming French power. At the same time that he created the French Academy, Cardinal Richelieu founded an institute for the promotion and development of science and the arts, of which the French Academy is only one part. Louis XIV oversaw and encouraged an impressive quantity of artistic production, mostly in architecture, with the single goal of affirming his own *grandeur*. He also subsidized men of science, even outside of France, the most famous being the German mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who invented calculus.

In the second half of the twentieth century, while France was aggressively affirming its place in international institutions, the State created scores of organizations to promote the international presence of the French language. In 1962, President Charles de Gaulle (1944–46, 1958–69) set out to increase France's *grandeur* by giving André Malraux (1901–69) the mandate to create a Ministry of Culture. Malraux had a lofty objective: he proclaimed France's mission "to propose to humanity the means and the method of an intellectual and spiritual action." In 1981, socialist president François Mitterrand appointed a prodigal Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, who embarked on a vast program of subsidies to all (some now say, any)

avant-garde artists in France. Artists, like intellectuals, are very influential in left-wing circles in France. Mitterrand needed to unify the Left to stay in power, and he reasoned that keeping artists happy was a good means to this. It didn't hurt. Mitterrand won two consecutive seven-year mandates. (The best source on the issue is *Le Gouvernement de la Culture* by Maryvone de Saint Pulgent.)

Now, radio and cinema are the main transmission belts of popular culture and language. So the French government conducts an open campaign to defend these industries against the incursion of English. The French government does everything in its power to promote the French film industry, to the envy of many of France's neighbors. The French film industry is notoriously well funded. The proceeds from an 11 percent tax on movie tickets go directly toward funding national film production. The government pays French producers advances on box office earnings so they don't have to wait for profits before making their next movie. Hollywood considers these perks unfair, yet French cinema is one of the few national film industries that has survived the onslaught of American cinema.

Americans are quick to accuse the French of subsidizing movies they don't watch themselves. In bad years, less than 30 percent of French moviegoers watch French films; 2001 was a vintage year with 50 percent. But compared to other countries' performances, this isn't bad. In 2000, Britain produced 115 films, Italy 87, and Germany 61, while France churned out 163. Most of the measures France uses to encourage cinema started in the 1960s and even the fifties. French cinema was in complete disarray at the time and government funding spawned an entire generation of influential filmmakers. As a matter of cultural choice, the French put much more energy into cinema than television. They produce six hundred hours of original television material per year—half of Britain's thirteen hundred hours, and one-third of Germany's two thousand hours. French TV chains are big investors in cinema. They play a lot of films, and since French TV doesn't show many commercials, watching films on TV is actually pleasant.

Measures in the field of music are much more recent. In the early 1990s, the music on French radio stations was mostly American. One of

France's senators, Michel Pelchat, decided to do something about it—a logical reflex because French senators can introduce bills unlike their Canadian peers. Pelchat looked across the Atlantic and saw Canada's radio regulation system, which specifies how much air time each radio station must reserve for national production. Most English Canadian radio stations must devote 40 to 60 percent of their airtime to Canadian artists. And most French Canadian radio stations must play a similar percentage of French language music, or music in a language other than English.

Pelchat launched a campaign to get similar regulations applied to French radio. Many French opposed the idea, arguing that they should be allowed to listen to whatever they wanted. That was no coincidence—French music was regarded as corny. But Pelchat's camp won by arguing that the only way to protect French culture was to guarantee radio time for French artists. Interestingly, this measure had the support of many French executives at big labels like Warner and Sony, who sought a bigger outlet for their own domestic production. The regulations actually apply to language, not nationality, so one interesting result has been a boost to a new generation of Quebec musicians who were largely unknown in France until then. Many Quebec artists have become celebrities in France as a result. Following the new regulations, French rap also took off. French rappers are quickly entering the musical mainstream, but they are still very influential in defining France's new counterculture. The stars are mostly Beurs fluent in *Verlan*.

While we lived there, not a week went by in France without talk of *l'exception culturelle* (the cultural exception). Since its creation, at the beginning of the 1990s, *l'exception culturelle* has become the rallying cry of all of those who oppose the idea that culture should be left to markets alone. The idea first surfaced during the 1993 round of discussions before the signature of the GATT, where issues of intellectual property and subsidies to arts and cultures were on the table for the first time. At the time, the U.S. film industry was calling for the elimination of French film subsidies. French filmmakers and intellectuals rallied together and put forward the concept of *l'exception culturelle*. They argued that the arts could not be treated like mere commodities to be traded freely, since they were

the vehicle of culture. France wanted protective measures for the arts to be permitted and even encouraged international trade agreements in the name of fostering national identities. Canada also supports the idea, although Canadians tend to be less confrontational than the French in promoting it. The French managed to win over other European countries, then other GATT member countries, with the idea of *l'exception culturelle*. The World Trade Organization now accepts the notion that culture has to be protected and subsidized.

In the meantime, the term *exception culturelle* has become a catch phrase the French use to justify any form of resistance to Americanization. French trade negotiators and government officials have become defensive about the protectionist overtones the term has internationally, so they have started to use the expression "cultural diversity" instead. It is, of course, ironic that a nation so bent on leveling cultural differences now preaches the virtues of distinctiveness and diversity. On the other hand, France's language and cultural policies have always been determined by the interest of the State. In a way, the French language is the State.