

# L'Académie française and Anglophone language ideologies

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**Abstract** The notion in popular linguistic discourse that French suffers from a narrow and prescriptive tradition of language policing, with the *Académie Française* (AF) as the central player, is frequently contrasted with an image of English as a democratic, borrowing language, better suited to its global role. This misrepresents the role of the AF in the regulation of French while overlooking the role of language ideologies, most evident in the two great dictionary projects (OED and DAF). This paper examines the actual role of the AF and other institutions in French language policy. Exploring popular linguistic representations of the AF and reiterated discourses about the relative numbers of words in English and French, we emphasize the dangers for language policy generally of reinforcing triumphalist views about English.

**Keywords** Académie Française · Language ideology · Dictionaries · Popular linguistic discourse · Images of English

The role of the Académie Française<sup>1</sup> (AF) and its portrayal in popular linguistic discourse (particularly in English) has attained a status similar to other common

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth AF. We have used the French name but the English practice of capitalising both words. In French it is *Académie française*.

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language myths (Bauer and Trudgill 1998), such as the number of words for *snow* in the ‘Eskimo language’ (Pullum 1991). These views are repeated, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, sometimes more seriously, in both popular discourse and informal asides during talks or seminars. As language commentators poked fun at the AF and the supposed French attitude to language, we wondered about the reasons for and implications of this perpetuation of clichés. Such jokes and comments would not be acceptable if they were aimed at other language communities. While they may be understandable in introductory courses in linguistics or language pieces for the popular media, since they draw on popular language ideologies, such representations can have profound consequences when they make their way into the public arena and are taken seriously by policy-makers.

By popular linguistic discourse we refer to discussions in public media (newspapers, magazines, websites etc.) about language, as well as popularizing texts by linguists themselves. That popular views about language—akin to what Niedzielski and Preston (2000) refer to as ‘folk linguistics’—should be taken seriously in relation to academic discourse is a point that should not need reiteration. Our interest here is in the interface between popular linguistic discourse and popularizing linguistics. While it is doubtless the case that discourses about English and the AF circulate independently of the work of linguists, linguists who take up the commendable challenge of making discussions of language available to a wider audience also contribute to these discourses. Their texts are influential precisely because they are widely read and influence public opinion and policy-makers. The “popular linguistics of gender” for example, with its focus on language and gender in terms of ‘difference’, has, as Cameron (1995, p. 193) shows, “become influential in academic linguistics” superseding earlier work that focused more clearly on questions of power. Popular linguistic discourses, especially those reproduced in popularizing texts by academics, can have a major effect on policy and practice through the need to accommodate popular views in a democratic polity. In particular, discourses emphasizing the liberal nature of English can be tied to the view that specific forms of liberal democracy are good for the world. Likewise, emphasizing the plasticity of English as a borrowing language can be tied to negative views of other languages as less suitable for modern life.

In popular writing about the English language, the AF is constantly invoked as an institution that controls, legislates and dictates on matters to do with French. “In the English-speaking world,” Lichfield (2002) points out, “the Académie is often mocked as a Canute-like body, trying officiously and pointlessly to hold back the inescapable evolution of the French language.” This popular image of the AF, he explains, is far from the truth, admitting that he too had “wrongly believed that the academy energetically manned the front-line trenches against the invasion of French by Anglicisms and neologisms, and had invented such words as ‘logiciel’ for software, or ‘ordinateur’ for computer.” Our objective here is to obtain a better understanding of the role of the AF in French language policy in contrast to its inordinately significant status for the Anglophone world. The AF plays an indexical role in Anglophone discourses about languages, constructing the institution as a guardian holding French back while English is allowed to prosper unfettered. Our examination of the Anglophone discursive production of the AF suggests that its

significance may be far greater as an Anglophone discursive product than as a Francophone language institution.

Informed writers on language academies generally, or the AF more particularly (Ager 1999; Adamson 2007; Spolsky 2004), clearly show the roles and limitations of these institutions, and the relationship between these academies—largely language planning institutions—and national language policies. Since a central concern of this paper is to show how the AF is constructed in popular linguistic discourse, where it stands for all that is wrong with attempts to control and police a language and all that is right about the supposedly liberal attitudes of Anglophone nations, this is not intended to be a comprehensive history or overview of the AF nor of the other institutions charged with the defence of French. We will, however, discuss in some detail the workings of the AF and related institutions in order to show how it operates as an advisory rather than a legislative body, how it is involved in a corpus planning project to develop, rather than conserve, French, and how the AF is more a product than a producer of language ideologies.

### The Académie Française and ideologies of English

While the AF as an institution “ne ressemble à rien d’autre” (is unlike any other) (Robitaille 2002, p. 15), it is also an institution whose “irréprochable inutilité” (irreproachable uselessness) (p. 20) is little understood. For many Anglophone writers, however, the AF is seen as an institution of great power and influence as well as one to be ridiculed for its antiquated customs and reactionary views on language. As Power (2007, p. 2) puts it, the members of the AF “are given swords and charged with defending the sanctity of the French language.” Or, as recent discussion of the Queen’s English Society warns, there are suggestions of “emulating those stuffed-chemise defenders of the French language, the Académie Française, and establishing an Academy of English” (Renzetti 2010). Participating in this popular linguistic discourse, linguists can reinforce such views. In one of her essays for her witty and informative newspaper column *Words*, for example, Ruth Wajnryb (2007) contrasts “the adaptability of English” with French, recommending that “French might develop a less fearful attitude to borrowing. Perhaps, it all goes back to Waterloo.” Likewise, Burns (2003 p. 22) speaks of the “attempt in the past of the *Académie Française* to legislate against the encroachment of English into French”. Reksulak et al. (2004) suggest that “English dictionary writers have never been subject to the stultifying regulation of a language purifier like the Académie Française” (p. 234). This view of the AF is then employed to contrast disciplined French with democratic English. Renzetti (2010), for example, asks of English “Isn’t it the Ellis Island of languages, absorbing new arrivals without fear or favour?”

As the author of yet another new book (McCrum 2010a) on the global spread of English put it in an interview, English is a ‘bottom up’ language: “The French have always been linguistic, it’s always been top down, it’s always come from on high, from the government, from the *Grandes Écoles*, from the Academy. And English... has always been from the bottom up, it’s always been from the ordinary people. It’s been the language of everyman I think.” McCrum (2010b). The AF, from this point

of view, is an institution that has aimed to prevent the democratic use of language and particularly the democratic incorporation of English terminology. More recently in the *Sunday Times*, “No country is more sensitive than France about language and its protection has always been imperative for politicians. English borrows liberally from French but the French are less *laissez faire*: a hallowed academy of elders known as the “immortals” zealously polices the official lexicon against English intruders and “globish”” (Campbell 2011).

English is thus constructed as a language that borrows democratically, its diverse vocabulary a reflection of the democratic and open nature of British or American people. Supposed reactions against English are taken as evidence of a less democratic spirit. “The world must just take a deep breath and admit that it has a universal language at last,” Jenkins (1995) tells us. “English need not be protected by French Academies, Canadian constitutions or Flemish language rioters,” an idea with a long history in both popular discourse and linguistic texts. As the great linguist Otto Jespersen suggested: “The English language would not have been what it is if the English had not been for centuries great respecters of the liberties of each individual and if everybody had not been free to strike out new paths for himself.” (Jespersen 1982/1938, p. 14). Such linguistic and political democracy is contrasted with French: “the English have never suffered an Academy to be instituted among them like the French or Italian Academies... In England every writer is, and has always been, free to take his words where he chooses, whether from the ordinary stock of everyday words, from native dialects, from old authors, or from other languages, dead or living” (Jespersen 1982/1938, p. 15).

That English has more words than other languages, particularly French, has been restated with unrelenting regularity in popular linguistic discourse. From Claiborne (1983) to Bryson (1990), and sources too numerous to list here, this idea has been reiterated to make the point that “English speakers can often draw shades of distinction unavailable to non-English speakers. The French, for example, cannot distinguish between house and home, between mind and brain, between man and gentleman, between ‘I wrote’ and ‘I have written’” (Bryson 1990, p. 3). Similarly Steven Pinker makes the claim that “the breathtaking half-a-million-word vocabulary of English is built from the grass-roots contributions of countless slang slingers and jargon mongers... English has been estimated to contain three to six times as many words as French. Some might say centuries guarding the purity of the French language have left it with verbose expressions and a puny vocabulary” (Pinker 1995, p. 29).

Reviewing two dictionaries of Australian English, Hajek (1998, p. 12), contends that “English is incredibly productive, flexible and absorbent. While French authorities spend millions of francs trying to extirpate the use of English ‘walkman’ (made up by the Japanese by the way) and insist on ‘balladeur’ (oh yeah!) without success, we have already moved onto ‘discman’ (again with the help of the Japanese)”. Announcing that English was about to achieve its one millionth word—while French, which “was the language of diplomacy in the 19th century but went into decline in the 20th, is said to contain just 100,000 words”—Paul Payack of *Global Language Monitor* (English to get one in a million 2006, p. 3) states that English “has triumphed because it is open to change... French is less so: its purity is guarded by the Académie Française”. The one millionth word announcement prompted further editorial comment: “This capacity for

change is the reason why English has become a genuinely global language...The contrast with France is stark. There new words need official permission to become French. So, like any economy where bureaucrats rule by regulation, the French language is static—pure but static—with a bare 100,000 words” (Everybody’s English 2006).

Reksulak et al. (2004, p. 253) claim that the AF, established “primarily to ‘purify’ French”, has “by preventing its contamination by foreign words, arguably stifled its development. One would therefore not expect the (official) French language to have grown as quickly over time as English or to have been as adaptable to new circumstances of time and place”. For others, such as David Crystal (2005), p. 4, such supposed regulation of French has always been a hopeless task: language cannot be controlled in this way. Acknowledging that English has its purists in a way not dissimilar to French, Crystal argues that the role of such bodies in “protecting a language from change” is quite impossible, since “French now is hugely different from the language as was spoken when the Academy was established in 1635”. Crystal, like many linguists, objects to the idea that language can be stopped from changing. He uses the AF to make his argument, by claiming that its supposed role in preventing (‘forbidding’) loan words, especially from English, has produced a language constrained in ways that English is not: “What would have happened to the English language if it had forbidden the arrival of loanwords? It would be a language a tenth of the size that it is today, and it would never have become the language of science. English has, like a vacuum-cleaner, sucked in words from over 350 other languages during the past 1,000 years—near 10,000 words from French in the early Middle Ages, for example, and all the words from Old Norse at that time. Of the million or so words in English today 80% are not Anglo-Saxon in origin” (p. 5).

The remarkable reiteration of these themes in both popular and linguistic discourse about English (with French as the foe to be mocked) reappears in these interrelated discourses in which the AF is an institution that limits borrowing and attempts the impossible task of preventing change, while English is a ‘vacuum cleaner’ with Aryan origins, a language with many more words than any other. Crystal (2005, p. 5) points to the “irony when we encounter French objections to the supposed Anglo-Saxon mentality expressed by such loans as *le computer*, forgetting that *computer* was originally a loan into English from the parent language of French”. “Loanwords,” he continues, “even on this massive scale, have not harmed English”, the argument being that French *should* accept such words, and that to do so would strengthen it. Not only is Crystal’s example erroneous—the word ubiquitously used in French is *ordinateur* (a word created in 1955 at IBM’s request)—but the argument that the word *computer* is originally French and its exclusion therefore ironic, misses the point that the work of the AF is not to exclude English words but first and foremost to help define what constitutes French.

## Dictionaries and language ideologies

Within France, while the AF is well known, people are far less certain what it does. It is, to be sure, a largely conservative institution, and one that is widely revered, but

its role in language policy in France is not as clear as it seems to be to the English-speaking public. As Robitaille (2002, p. 51) notes, “Dans le public, il est évident que pratiquement personne ne sait ce qu’est précisément l’Académie, ni ce qu’elle fait, ni à quoi elle sert” (For the public it is clear that practically no one knows exactly what the Academy is, nor what it does, or what its purpose is.).<sup>2</sup> Although the emblematic dome is actually that of the *Institut de France* and the ‘large majestic’ building on the Seine houses the five académies—*Sciences, Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, Beaux Arts, and Sciences Morales et Politiques*, in addition to the *Académie française*, people think of the dome as the AF itself. As Robitaille (2002), p. 22 notes, “Presque tous les Parisiens savent... où se trouve l’Académie, et presque tous ignorent que cette adresse n’est pas celle de l’Académie, mais de l’Institut de France.” (Almost all Parisians know where the Academy is, and almost none know that this address is not the Academy but the French Institute.)

In this research into the contrasts between the representations of the AF and its workings, two visits shed more light on what actually goes on in its quiet corridors.<sup>3</sup> As explained by Jean-Mathieu Pasqualini, the *Directeur de Cabinet du Secrétaire perpétuel de l’Académie française*, the AF is in fact the “poorer of all the académies” and is only granted a few offices at the end of one of the wings, always on a temporary basis. Its budget is quite small, with only 4% coming from the Government and the rest from endowments. Financially, as well as from a legal perspective (see Section 3), its impact on French language policy is quite limited. As J-M Pasqualini explained: “Nous n’avons pas les moyens de mener une politique linguistique.” (We do not have the means to engage in language policy.)

To understand the role of the AF, we need to explore its role in relation to other institutions and to French language ideologies. It does not play the central role in dictating how people should think and behave in relation to French as suggested by popular Anglophone discourse, but rather is a product of French discourses on French: The AF is more a product than a producer of French language ideologies. In talking of language ideologies, we are drawing on the work of Kroskrity (2000) and others, who have pointed to the significance of understanding the “structured and consequential ways in which we think about language” (Seargeant 2009, p. 26). Language ideologies emerge over long periods of time, through processes of state formation and education. In France, arguably starting with the *Serment de Strasbourg* in 842, certainly gaining strength with the post-revolutionary insistence on primary education in French, language policy has been unremittingly centrist and monolingual. The notion of mother tongue, equated with nation in what has always been a diverse and multilingual society, was crucial to the formation of the French state, resulting in a set of ideologies about French, what it is and what it is not, which are integral to any discussion of the language. For the Revolution, the idea of unity through one language was taken as a central element of democracy, since

<sup>2</sup> All translations from the French are by the authors.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Jean-Mathieu Pasqualini for his time and for his courtesy in answering the questions we had prepared for him. Our two visits to the AF (July 2010 and 2011) were invaluable opportunities to appreciate the conditions under which the AF actually works. Thanks also to Alain Laugier, President of the *Commission de Terminologie et Néologie de la Santé et des Affaires Sociales*, for providing us with the introduction which made those visits possible.

speakers of other varieties and languages were not seen as capable of participation (Jaffe 1999).

For Henriette Walter (1988, p. 18) a dominant French ideology suggests that “dans les langues voisines, les usagers fabriquent des mots à volonté sans que personne y trouve rien à redire. Le Français au contraire ne considère pas sa langue comme un instrument malléable, mis à sa disposition pour s'exprimer et pour communiquer.” (In neighbouring languages, users freely create new words without any comment. The French, by contrast, do not consider their language to be a malleable instrument at their disposal for communication and self-expression). Although we need to be cautious about all such generalisations, British and French attitudes to policy, identity, language and nation indeed differ in many ways, including different understandings of the role of standard language and education. These are much more strongly pursued in France than in Britain, as exemplified by the different colonial orientations towards the promotion of French and English. Whereas French may serve as a strong symbol of the “preservation of French identity”, British pride may more likely focus on the widespread use of English, “its flexibility, its efficiency in communication and its ability to adapt to represent a wide range of peoples, communities and ideas” (Ager 1996, p. 194). The use of the standard language “improves efficiency in Britain, but improves social cohesion in France” (Ager 1996, p. 195). In this view, France is the land of the macro policy, in the “grand gesture and symbolic declaration”, while the British prefer more local and covert activity (Ager 1996, p. 202).

Nowhere are the differences and contradictions in thinking about language more evident than in the great French and English dictionary projects. The *Oxford English Dictionary* was based around a remarkably inclusive idea of English, where dialects, varieties, and all words, however obscure, were to be included. The *OED* was to be as big as possible, a project that, as Winchester (2003, p. 43) puts it, could sit alongside other great colonial projects of “iron and steam and fired brick.” The *OED* was a product of “a particular history of national self-definition during a remarkable period in the expansion and collapse of the British empire and the development of a far more democratic state at home” (Willinsky 1994, p. 194). The upshot of this massive work was to produce a dictionary and a set of discourses about English that emphasized inclusivity, size and scale: English was bigger than any other language. Yet, while a cornerstone of empire and national identity, the *OED* was also central in the construction of the “myth of standard English” (Harris 1988, p. 1), a myth “which had been invented to serve the purposes of a typically Victorian brand of national idealism” (p. 26).

In France, dictionary projects took a different route to a nevertheless similar goal. “French lexicographers,” as Nadeau and Barlow put it, “do their spring cleaning regularly so that the language doesn't hold on to words it doesn't need” (2006, p. 82). French dictionaries, such as *Larousse* or *Le Petit Robert*, and in particular the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (DAF), are considered as reference works whose purpose is to “inform usage”. They are the product of an exclusionary rather than inclusionary approach to language. As Maurice Druon stated in the 1986 preface to the DAF (2000, p. xv): “Le *Dictionnaire* [...] n'est ni encyclopédique, ni historique, ni analogique, ni même étymologique. [...] Le *Dictionnaire* de

l'Académie est celui de l'usage, simplement et suprêmement, le dictionnaire du bon usage, qui par là sert, ou devrait servir, de référence à tous les autres." (The DAF is not encyclopaedic, historical, analogical, nor even etymological. The DAF is a dictionary of usage, purely and ultimately, the dictionary of good usage, which therefore is or should be used as a reference for all the others.) With such diametrically opposed purposes, it is no surprise that the number of words in the OED and the DAF are not comparable and, on that basis, that English can indeed boast of having several thousands more words than French. The DAF aims to inform speakers as to which French words can confidently be used in Modern French, while the OED aims to be a repository of every reliably recorded word in English. The sheer number of words in the OED is testimony to the interests of James Murray and the lexicographers who made it, but no guide to current usage, while the DAF is a safe guide for modern speakers, but not representative of the breadth or variety of French.

An exclusionary approach to the construction of the French dictionaries, however, does not imply an antipathy to borrowing from other languages. As Walter (2009, p. 1) points out "il existe des milliers de mots venus d'ailleurs, que la langue française a accueillis sans modération au cours des siècles" (there are thousands of words from elsewhere, which the French language has welcomed without moderation over the centuries). The introduction to the DAF itself (DAF 2000, p. xii) mentions "les nombreux emprunts faits, à travers le temps, aux langues étrangères les plus diverses, emprunts qui ont enrichi la nôtre" (the numerous borrowings made over time from foreign languages, borrowings which have enriched ours). It is worth recalling here Bailey's (1991, p. 91) remark that "Far from its conventional image as a language congenial to borrowing from remote languages, English displays a tendency to accept loanwords mainly when they first have been adopted by other European languages".

The British and the French are united in their belief in the superiority of their respective languages, beliefs forged as part of their self-image of nations with colonial empires. While the British took immense pride in the vast scope of their language, this inclusivity was intimately bound to the exclusivity of the mythical standard. Standard English, a carefully described and prescribed language which, as Harris (2009, pp. 38–39) asserts, has never existed "except in the textbooks of its pedagogic proponents" and whose development was greatly assisted by linguists "who should have known better", could never contain the variety suggested by the great dictionary project, but was instead a product of this nationalist enterprise, a class code concealed behind this display of diversity. The French, meanwhile, proceeding along similar lines, but from a different language ideology, chose to make their dictionaries repositories of what would be considered standard. Dialectal variants were never included in the grammars or dictionaries, except in the "remarques normatives" (warnings) against their usage (DAF 2000, p. xiii).

### **The role of the AF for the evolution of French**

We have argued above that the ways in which the AF is constructed in Anglophone discourses and the ways in which it is viewed within France reflect very different language ideologies. We now turn to the role of the AF in the regulation and

evolution of the French language. As is well documented, the AF is not the only player in the defence of French: a number of organisations, private or non-governmental as well as governmental, aim at defending and monitoring the French language (Adamson 2007; Ager 1999), but it is the AF which is pre-eminent in discourses about French language ideologies and policies. In order to understand the roles and effects of language academies, we need to do more than focus on what they purport to do in their official documents, dictionaries, grammars or pronouncements on language: Their role is far more complex and needs to be understood in relation to the development and maintenance of language ideologies. However, those documents can help us shed light on the role of the AF in its relation to French and French institutions and, importantly, they help refute two significant myths: its supposed opposition to change and its alleged legal authority.

First, we must note the AF has been instrumental in both language change and language conservation. It has, for example, been a proponent of spelling reforms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, again advocating reform in 1901–1905, only to have its proposals rejected by a new elite of teachers and public figures. This scenario was repeated in the late 1980s, when the AF sided with linguists from the *Conseil supérieur de la langue française* for a series of spelling reforms (including giving up most uses of the circumflex). Again it was public disagreement—journalists, intellectuals, teachers and language pundits—that stopped these reforms from going ahead. As Nadeau and Barlow (2006, p. 387) put it, “the Academy had been at the forefront of reform, challenging the reactionary purists.”

To be sure, the AF may be more conservative than revolutionary, but its main role is in the creation of new terminology. Its mandate is to give input to the *Commission générale de terminologie et de néologie* (CGTN) as part of the terminology process to enrich the French language. As such, the AF is defined (DGLFLF 2009b, p. 5) as the “instance de référence... pour les questions d’usage” (the point of reference... for questions of usage) and in this role, it “participe très activement aux travaux de terminologie” where “sa présence permet un dialogue fructueux” (participates very actively in the terminology works (where) its presence enables a fruitful dialogue). The role of the AF is thus not to forbid foreign words, as in the popular Anglophone view, but to create new French words. More generally, the French terminology commissions are not against new words so much as intent on long-term language planning to help their integration: “La formation des mots nouveaux... témoigne de la vitalité d’une langue et d’une culture” (The creation of new words... bears witness to the vitality of a language and a culture) (DGLFLF 2009c).

The preference for the creation of new French words over the adoption of foreign words is not in question. As Druon, in his 1986 Introduction (DAF 2000, p. xviii), explained: “Nous ne faisons place aux mots étrangers qu’autant qu’ils sont vraiment installés dans l’usage, et qu’il n’existe pas déjà un honnête mot français pour désigner la même chose ou exprimer la même idée. Nous sommes d’ailleurs plus accueillants qu’on ne le prétend, considérant que la langue est moins menacée par l’extension du vocabulaire que par la détérioration de la syntaxe.” (We only make room for foreign words insofar as they are really settled in usage, and there is no honest French word to refer to the same object or express the same idea. We are in

fact more welcoming than is claimed, as we consider that language is less threatened by vocabulary extension than by syntactic deterioration).

The primary role of the AF is therefore not to restrict the use of borrowed terminology, but to create and sanction alternative terms: The AF holds a “rôle éminent dans l’enrichissement de la langue” (pre-eminent role in the enrichment of the language) (DGLFLF 2008, p. 11). Even though it does indeed restrict the introduction of foreign words, including “anglicismes”, by preferring the creation of alternative terms,<sup>4</sup> what is important is not the fact that it may (although not always) restrict the importation of foreign words, but the fact that it is recognised as having the authority to sanction new terms. We argue that this authority comes in some measure from the French bias towards regulation and centralisation and the preference for normalisation and standards. Indeed the Commission for Normalisation (AFNOR) is also involved in the terminological process, together with the AF and the other terminological commissions (see Figure 1).

Second, the AF is not a legislative body. As various writers (Walter 2009; Nadeau and Barlow 2006; Robitaille 2002) point out, the AF is a French cultural rather than legislative institution. Any legislative power lies with the *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France* (DGLFLF) and, while the AF is “tightly associated” with the terminological process and even referred to as the “instance ultime d’approbation des termes” (DGLFLF 2009b, p. 7), the terminological process requires extensive consultation between the different commissions. Although new terms must ultimately be approved by the AF, the process often results in terms being accepted by the AF after a series of back-and-forth negotiations (“processus de navette”, DGLFLF 2008, p. 7).

The terminological process is tightly defined in several documents published by the DGLFLF, expanding the legislation of the *Décret 96-602 du 3 juillet 1996 relatif à l’enrichissement de la langue française* (Décret 1996). Eighteen commissions, one in each ministry, contribute to the CGTN, each with between 20 and 30 members including a member from the AF. The commissions submit lists of terms to the CGTN (Décret 1996, Art. 9), responsible for liaising with the AF as well as with the *Académie des Sciences* and with AFNOR (which is a member of the ISO) for normalisation. This process involves close collaboration with francophone partners such as Canada, Quebec and Belgium (DGLFLF 2009a, b, c), the Quebec language website (*Termium*) being an important resource.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the terminological process, the terms recommended by the CGTN are published in the *Journal officiel de la République Française* (JO) and made available through the Internet site ([www.franceterme.culture.fr](http://www.franceterme.culture.fr)). When new terms are approved and

<sup>4</sup> Indeed (DGLFLF 2008, p.11) the AF “considère comme inopportune et en totale contradiction avec le rôle du dispositif la publication d’anglicismes entrant progressivement dans l’usage, au motif qu’ils sont employés en français” (considers as inappropriate and in total contradiction with the role of the process the publication of anglicisms which have come into use progressively, on the grounds that they are used in French.).

<sup>5</sup> It is worth observing in this context that while the AF website receives two million requests for translation or verification per year, the *Grand dictionnaire terminologique* of the Quebec language commission receives fifty million requests yearly, half of which come from Europe (Nadeau and Barlow 2006, p. 402).

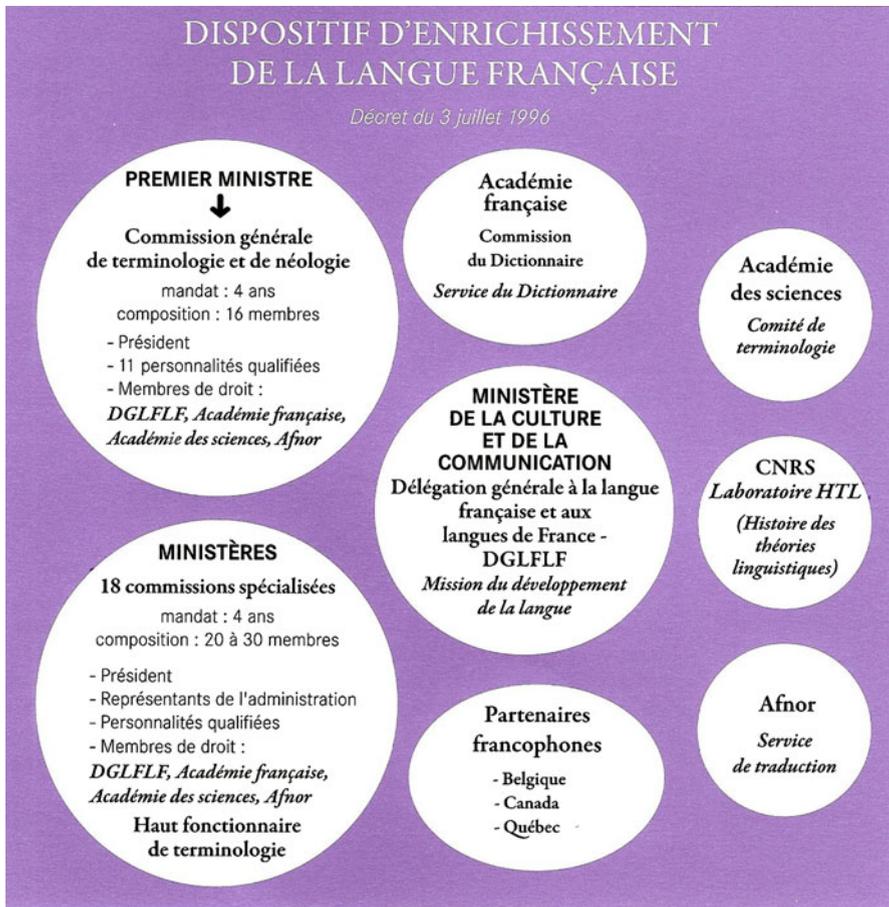


Fig. 1 DGLFLF (2009b, p. 6)

published in the JO, no further revision to the list can be published without the AF's approval (Décret 1996, Art. 13). An important point is that the JO is only a means of publishing information, not itself legislation.

As far as actual legislation is concerned, the French Constitution (4 October 1958, Art. 2) declares that "La langue de la République est le français." (The language of the republic is French) and the *Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication* is also the "ministère de la langue". The famous *Loi Toubon* (4 août 1994) legislates that all French workers and citizens have the right to have access to all documentation in French ("Droit au français"), thereby forcing the translation of all documents into French. The *Décret 1996* specifies the application of the *Loi Toubon*, while the *Décret 1998* lists some exceptions (e.g. airlines and foreign companies). In the *Circulaire du 14 février 2003*, Raffarin, then Prime Minister, decreed that there must be agents in each ministry to ensure the application of the *Loi Toubon*.

French language ideology and policy are both normative and centralised (Ager 1999; Le Nevez 2008) and need to be seen in the context of wider processes of centralization in France, from the metric system to school curricula. As seen above, there are indeed legislative bodies which regulate the use of French and the creation of French terminology, but the role of the State is not to decide on terms nor to impose terms to others,<sup>6</sup> only to facilitate and coordinate the creation of terms and to promote and publicise terminology (DGLFLF 2009b, p. 4). These new terms become obligatory for government and official use but the publication of terms in the JO has very little effect on general public behaviour. The “first (and only) time the work of the Academy took on a genuinely official character” (Nadeau and Barlow 2006, p. 178) was after the publication of the 6th edition of its *Dictionnaire* in 1835, when the government turned to the AF to provide norms of usage for government exams. It is worth mentioning in this respect that, as noted by Ager (1999, p. 149) some of the work of the AF has been criticised by French linguists: “the *Grammaire de l’Académie* of 1932 was howled down as being scientifically poor”.

This brings us to our final point about the AF: despite its conservative agenda and longstanding position within France, its role has often changed, from reformist to conservationist, from guardian of norms to provider of alternatives. The original ‘mission statement’, given by the King himself (*Lettres patentes*, Louis XIV, 1637/ Académie Française 1995, p. 8), was “pour rendre le langage françois non seulement élégant, mais capable de traiter tous les arts et toutes les sciences” (to make French not merely elegant but also capable of dealing with all arts and sciences). Its statutes (*Statuts et règlements*: XXIV, 1635/Académie Française 1995, p. 19) declared that “La principale fonction de l’Académie sera de travailler avec tout le soin et la diligence possible à donner des règles à notre langue et à la rendre pure, éloquente et capable de traiter les arts et les sciences” (the main role of the Academy will be to work with all possible care and diligence to give our language rules and to make it pure, eloquent and capable of dealing with all arts and science). In the early nineteenth century (*Statuts*, 1816/Académie Française 1995, p. 41), this had become “ayant pour objet de travailler à épurer et à fixer la langue” (with the object of working to purify and fix the language). Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, current Secrétaire perpétuel, nevertheless, points out in the introduction to the latest edition of the DAF (2000, p. x) that the AF is “soucieuse de se garder également éloignée de l’écueil du purisme et de celui du laxisme” (careful to steer as clear of the shoals of purism as of that of laxity), echoing Maurice Druon, who in 1986 (DAF 2000, p. xiii) said it was pursuing its path “entre les deux haies épineuses du purisme et du laxisme” (between the two thorny hedges of purism and laxity).

The common French attitude to language is that of accepting and indeed expecting standards to be set. As Walter (1988, p. 18) notes: “Nous avons en effet été trop bien dressés à n’admettre un mot que s’il figure déjà dans le dictionnaire. Si

<sup>6</sup> “L’état n’a ni vocation à décider du choix des termes, toujours plus nombreux et spécialisés, nécessaires aux différents métiers, ni pouvoir de les imposer à d’autres qu’à lui-même” (The state does not have a mandate to decide on the choice of terms, always increasing in number and becoming more specialised, which are necessary for the different professions, nor does it have the power to impose them onto others besides itself.) (DGLFLF 2009b, p. 4).

nous ne l'y trouvons pas, nous déclarons avec la plus grande conviction, mais contre toute évidence, puisque nous venons de l'employer en étant compris, que ce mot n'est pas français." (We have in fact been too well conditioned so that we only allow a word if it's already in the dictionary. If we don't find it, we declare with the greatest conviction but against all evidence, since we've just used it and been understood, that the word isn't French). The examples she gives of such rejection are *taciturnité* and *cohabiteateur*, both perfectly understandable French creations which just happen not to be in the dictionary. We can also note that the popular rejection of 'jargon' (the use of technical terms) goes back at least to Molière who makes fun of the Latin which pedantic doctors use as a smokescreen (*Le médecin malgré lui*). What is now presented as a recent reaction against English loanwords, especially common in the worlds of IT and business in the twenty-first century, may be seen as the continuation of this tradition, rejecting the use of words that are viewed as having more to do with status than with communicative needs.

As noted above, French has taken in large amounts of borrowed vocabulary throughout its history. More recently, new vocabulary is being imported from the Francophone world, especially from North Africa and the Caribbean, but also Asia and the Pacific area. Like any language that plays a major role in global hip hop culture (Durand 2002), French is of course a highly vibrant borrowing and creative language. Such borrowing and creativity may not always be approved in conservative circles, but the AF can only play a very limited role in that regard. Finally, we note that the DAF is certainly not a household item in France. The dictionaries people use are the commercial dictionaries such as the *Larousse* or *Robert*. As their introductions make clear however, these dictionaries, just like the DAF, aim not to catalogue all the words that have occurred or can occur in French, but to be a "guide to usage".

### **Conclusion: producing and perpetuating language myths**

The AF has become a symbol of language protectionism in popular linguistic discourse about English. Our intention is not to defend the AF, nor to argue that its ideology is not conservative, but rather to show how this relatively minor player in language policy has become a major discursive tool to construct English as democratic. The AF must be understood in relation to French language ideology, centralised processes of French policy making, and French attitudes to such policies. French dictionaries, whether commercial such as the *Larousse* or *Robert*, or government-sponsored such as the DAF, have always limited the scope of what to include. The OED project, by contrast, operated with a very different approach to inclusivity. Yet French and British language ideologies have more in common than is often admitted, particularly in the belief in the glory of their respective tongues and in the value of their standard languages. The scale of the different dictionary projects does not translate into French people using fewer words than English people. Nor does it mean that the British do not share an equally strong sense of what is "correct English" for educated English speakers, as reflected in the general public's reactions to "lapses" in English use (in letters to editors, for instance) and

the interest in popularising books and articles about the English language (Cameron 1995). Nor does it mean that standard language ideologies play a lesser role in Britain than in France, only that they are more overt in the one than the other. The role of linguists in constructing standard English is concealed (Harris 2009), yet popular linguistic discourses on English may have far more influence on the standardization of English than their favourite target, the AF, has on French.

While other corpus planning endeavours to develop languages for science and technology—for instance the creation of local terminologies in languages such as Filipino (Gonzalez 1998; Ferguson 2006)—are regarded positively, French attempts to do likewise are viewed as regressive and reactionary and considered to demonstrate a lack of flexibility and willingness to adapt. Anglophone popular linguistic discourses constantly reiterate the accusation that the French ‘police’ their language (a conflation, at the very least, of questions of policy and planning), while English is presented as open, free, flexible and unconstrained. Repeated tropes about the AF and the historical ceremonies re-enacted beneath the ornate cupola of its old building, imply that such archaic posturing reflects out-of-touch dealings with language in the modern world. Robitaille (2002, p. 4314) asks how to account for the notoriety of the AF in France: “Nous savons bien que tout cela est ridicule, mais nous comprenons également que cela marche encore—parce que cela fait partie des gènes françaises.” (We know that it’s all ridiculous, but we also understand equally that it still works—because it’s part of French genes). For him, this is akin to British attitudes to the monarchy—a slightly amused, ironic but nevertheless gentle fondness for these rather absurd relics of earlier times.

Just as we may wish to account for the apparent fascination for the British royal family around the world, we also need to consider how the AF has become such a fascination for the Anglophone world. Constructing this mythical foe out of the AF, with its costumes, customs and regulations, discourses about the AF emphasise its supposed opposition to change, its defensive position against English and its pronouncements on new words. English, by contrast, becomes a modern language that is open to change, unregulated and democratic. These discourses are not so much about French and the AF as they are about producing images of English as a language suited to its role as the chosen language of the new world order. Under the guise of a seemingly light-hearted dig at the traditions of the AF, there is much more at stake here: the reference to the AF indexes all that English is claimed not to be.<sup>7</sup>

With many writers on the global spread of English such as Crystal (2003) or McCrum (2010a) hovering between careful description and less measured triumphalism, and with English having emerged as a major player in divisions between the advantaged and the disadvantaged, it is incumbent on linguists to deal very carefully with the political context of English. The dominance of English worldwide renders comparison with other languages invidious, and perpetuating

<sup>7</sup> The French, moreover, seem to be deemed fair game for stereotyping, at least in the Anglophone world: While the French are said to be strong on food, wine, arts and amour, they are also presented as arrogant, over-regulated, cowardly and inefficient. We shall not dwell further here on this deplorably crass stereotyping, nor the many sins of fixity that are committed as part of Anglophone tongue-in-cheek commentary on their Gallic rivals, but we do insist that the relation between these discourses and those on language and the AF need to be appreciated.

misunderstandings of the role of the AF promotes a particular set of beliefs about English, about the contemporary global order, and about language in general. Popular discourses about language have an important influence on public opinion, and we need to recognize the insidious role that such discourses about English play in the production and perpetuation of language myths such as language size. Superficial slogans in popular linguistic discourse not only conceal class and establishment interests in the promotion and defence of English, but potentially have a negative impact on language policy in other parts of the world.

Our concern is therefore larger than making a point about English and the AF. More broadly, although language policy may be informed by academic inquiry, it is not immune from popularist accounts of language. From language and gender (Cameron 1995) to a more recent interest in language endangerment (Moore et al. 2010), popular linguistic discourse typically and necessarily presents complex linguistic questions in simplified terms. Women are assumed to use language in one way and men another; languages are perceived as “neatly-bounded, abstract, autonomous grammatical systems (each of which corresponds to a neatly-bounded ‘worldview’)” (Moore et al. 2010, p. 2). When linguists write for broader audiences, there is an inevitable move into popular linguistic discourse. The complicity of popular language writers in the discourses about English helps construct a view that English is not only a great borrowing language but that it is the borrowing language *par excellence*, or indeed *the only* language that borrows. The implications for other languages (Indigenous languages, for example) as less suitable as vehicles for modern life can have very serious consequences for language policy around the world.

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