

English in French universities: Yes indeed!

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One can only congratulate the French Minister of Education who had the Gaul to present a Bill which now makes it possible to teach in English part of the classes taught in French Universities. Some commentators alleged this might very well be a shrewd manoeuvre: the Minister of Education was agitating a red rag to the bull in order to render it blind to the other more contentious changes which were also in stock.

I personally prefer to analyse this move as being a sign of considerable courage and backbone – albeit insufficient as the Bill is only making very small steps in the right direction. It was predictable that the Minister of Education would face extreme hostility; knowing this she might as well have made a much more decisive move that would have once and for all put an end to all this nonsense.

The current debate raises very similar issues to the ones which were at the heart of the raging opposition against criminology faculties (Cario, Villerbu, Herzog-Evans, *La criminologie à l'Université. Mythes et réalités*, L'Harmattan, 2012 ; Herzog-Evans, 'Who is afraid of criminology?', 2012, SSNR n° 2034867; Colson R., 'Criminologie à la française. French academic exceptionalism', *British Journal of Criminology*, 2013, n° 53: 552-567). What is at stake here is a mix of fear, posturing, ideology and conservatism which is totally removed from real life. As is too often the case in France, it isolates this country and leaves it stranded in isolationist ignorance. It paradoxically leads to the very opposite result which the opponents to the Bill would aspire to achieve.

Let us indeed examine their arguments. The first which was unsurprisingly raised was a classic instinctive 'defence of the French language'. In France, everybody seems to agree that the French language is in immediate danger of disappearing and that every hand should be on deck to try and protect it. In danger really?! Who exactly is supposed to be the aggressor here? Where are the armies of diabolical Illuminati who have vowed to obliterate it? The collective blindness is such that nobody seems to be able to see the elephant in the room: this is yet another conspiracy theory which is just as groundless as what proliferates on the Internet.

By now our reader will have guessed what my view on this is: nobody is plotting to destroy the French language; this is just fantasy and irrational collective fear. What is happening, on the other hand, is that the French language will inevitably become an ordinary language, one that only its population and those of other francophone countries will eventually speak. Currently, it is only artificially maintained on other continents by way of financial and human

IV. As a matter of fact, why on earth is France so determined to force-feed its language onto other people? What a strange remnant of outdated colonialism and arrogant belief in its own superiority is that? What is it that this country is deep inside actually trying to achieve? It clearly has nothing to do with an actual threat that the French language would face – and I shall get back to this. What it really is is obsolete despair over the loss of France’s colonial supremacy and its self-proclaimed greatness in particular in terms of language.

What France refuses to see is that influence is something that cannot be obtained by way of whining and regret for what is past, but is something that needs to be conquered. Greatness cannot be dictated; it does not pre-exist and is never permanently acquired. One has to fight tooth and nail for it and it is only sustained with consistent effort.

This is precisely where the ‘defenders of the French language’ bear a terrible responsibility. Their whining protectionism isolates France from the rest of the world and has consistently contributed to the very loss of influence which saddens them so much. Please allow me to refer to my two majors here: law and criminology. In these fields France’s suborn refusal to read and speak English has led it to desert, but for a few exceptions, international conferences, truly international and European scientific journals that really matter. We are also for the most part absent from places where new legal norms are elaborated (e.g. at the Council of Europe) or where innovative practices are created, tested and evaluated (e.g. European networks on probation, offender supervision, domestic violence risk reduction, high risk offenders’ management and so on). Whilst we lament the Dutch and the Flemish who incidentally would have much more convincing reasons to fear for their languages than we do, are absolutely everywhere in the aforementioned conferences, journals and networks and this because they have pragmatically accepted that they had to speak and read in English. Interestingly, many of their academics are also capable of speaking and working in French and German.

Our obstinate snub is also responsible for the rather poor quality of our scientific production, at least in social sciences and law. Most of the time, this production will only have French readers. For indeed we more often than not ignore international literature and only cite French or, in the best of cases, francophone authors. Unfortunately, and in particular in criminology, what counts, what works, what constitutes evidence is and has been published in English. Our stubborn ignorance of what goes on in the rest of the academic and field world – who does not share our useless apprehensions – generates a literature which is sadly totally disconnected from up-to-date evidence and research. How dare we publish in areas where a mass of knowledge and previous studies exist without referring to any of them? And how do we thus expect to be taken seriously?

Alas our PhD thesis are in the same vein. Even though access is not an issue nowadays with intranet library subscriptions and Google scholar, most of our PhD students simply ignore foreign literature even when it has already researched extensively the very issue which they are working on. At best one might find in their list of references a handful of obsolete or unrelated quotes. In fact it is not just our PhD students who are oblivious to the literature. The same applies to most of our students who will typically have lost most of their high school English after a year or two at University. A few dozen hours of general English classes barely sustain this high school level. I teach general criminology and applied criminology to

Master I and II students and I must say that I am rather desperate to find ways of making them access the monumental and remarkable production which exists in my field. Unfortunately, these bright fourth and fifth year students will at best access the summary that I shall thus be forced to present to them in the twenty hours which I am allocated for their classes. This is clearly not acceptable: it maintains my students at a level way below what other European students will reach. Some will probably object that French students' English is too poor for them to be able to attend classes in English. My answer to this is quite simple: it is the other way around; their English is too poor *because* they do not attend classes in English.

In the meantime, outside of Universities, other training schools such as *sciences politiques* and commerce and business schools have pragmatically embraced the world as it is: they teach a number of classes in English thereby making available to their students what our universities deny them. It sadly seems that our universities have decided to commit collective suicide by way of festering in isolation, and scientific backwardness.

In other words what is at stake goes way beyond allowing foreign students to sit in our amphitheatres – even if the Minister of Education was right to raise this subject. A lot of foreigners would dream to come and study in France as this country still represents culture and art de vivre. In fact, if they did they would discover a fascinating peculiarity: our students' fees are bordering on the ludicrous. Whilst an English student pays 9000 pounds per year, a French student pays 450 euros. If French universities became bilingual along with scientifically attractive, there is no doubt in the world that we would see numerous foreign students, including Anglophone students sailing towards our shores. As it is, savvy students go to Holland or Scandinavia. It is important to note that teaching in English would not be sufficient. We would need to build up a reputation. Students do not choose a university solely based on the locals' art de vivre. They are also attracted to good curricula and scientific reputation. As it is now, our researchers hardly ever build a reputation which can rival with their foreign colleagues': since they do not regularly publish in English, they remain invisible.

Unfortunately, the impact of this shameful isolationism goes far beyond our universities and the academic world. It impacts on what is available, for instance in my field, to prevent and efficiently deal with crime and reoffending. The literature is out there: by now we do have a fairly good knowledge of what works, what does not and what is promising (see e.g. the latest Craig A., Dixon L. and Gannon T.A., *What works in offender rehabilitation. An evidence-based approach to assessment and treatment*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). Sadly, since French researchers and practitioners are oblivious to it, this body of research and practice is invisible to policy makers and, for this reason, has no impact on policies and professional practices. The sad result is that politicians can go on to make criminal justice decisions which are solely based on ideology and is never evaluated; the only perceivable changes will depend on polls' results. Therefore, the aforementioned ideology is at times conservative and at times liberal. Equally depressing is the fact that policy makers still believe that they can change criminological outcomes by simply changing the law as the current pitiful chimera of the 'new' probation order shows (Herzog-Evans, « Récidive et surpopulation: pas de baguette magique juridique », *Alpénal* mars 2013: 136-139 et « Conférence de

consensus: trop de droit; pas assez d'envergure institutionnelle et scientifique », *Recueil Dalloz*, 2013, n° 11: 720-723).

In the same vein, France is also for the most part absent from the very international networks which will make tomorrow's Europe and where best practices and ideas are exchanged and people work in partnership and this simply because English is the working language. For the same reason we hardly apply for – or obtain – European research funding. Whilst, like Asterix, we sulk on our remote Brittany peninsula, the Dutch, English, Belgian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Lithuanians, Croatians and Hungarians are everywhere to be seen.

Precisely, opponents to the 'English at University' endeavour raise a second argument, which owes everything to Asterix and nothing to this Bill. And as is too often the case they brandish this off the topic objection as if it was evidence-based. Here, the issue is not so much that French will be threatened if we start speaking English; what these 'defenders of the French language' are saying is that the French language is being colonised from within. Annoyingly, we have heard this all before. It goes as far as taking the shape of a grotesque artificial and painstaking creation of new French words with the aim of replacing Anglophone words which were originally invented to designate a new concept or product. An amusing example is the creation of '*courriel*' intended to replace 'email' but which nobody – apart from public services' who are by law obliged to obey – ever uses. For indeed the creators of these protectionist terms are blind to the obvious: it is only a people who can successfully create words. In other fields, such meticulous replacements borders on the insult. Such is for instance the case, in criminology, when the word 'desistance' is stubbornly replaced by '*désistement*', even though '*désistance*' does exist in the French language: French academics have been until very recently totally absent from the exceptionally prolific and cutting-edge desistance body of research. As a matter of fact they have just heard of it (through, in particular the special edition of the *Journal Ajpénal*, which I chaired in July 2010 and the recent edited volume by M. Mohamed, *Les sorties de délinquance*, La Découverte, 2012). It would be much more elegant and much more productive to use the original word as it was created by the founders of this literature and to start producing empirical desistance studies of our own.

This fear of being eaten up by the English language is a historical joke. What, after all, is English if not a mix of Angle, Saxon, Scandinavian and yes of Latin and Normand? In other words, what the French are actually afraid of is of being colonized by a language that they did not hesitate to colonise themselves in the past. As an example, the history of the word 'barbecue' is hilarious. It originally meant, in old French, that an animal was roasted from the beard to the rear (*de la barbe au cul*). After having crossed the Channel, it was then re-exported to France to the immense annoyance of the 'defenders of the French language' inquisitors. Besides, whereas the French language was bastardised on numerous occasions by foreign invasions, this is unlikely to happen now that this country is protected by the European Union's shield. Moreover, attempting to protect the French language against any foreign influence shows remarkable ignorance as to what is consubstantial to any language: it changes and in fact very rapidly so.

What's more, one might wonder which French language the aforementioned inquisitors are talking about? Today's French? Surely not, since they are the very same people who despair in a geriatric 'nothing is like it used to be and there are no more seasons' mode that nobody knows how to read or write any longer. We hear similar discourses learnedly stating that 'yesteryear there was little crime and families were united'. In other words, it is not today's French but a so-called glorious fifty years in the past French that they aspire to get back to. One might ask however why would this French be more defensible than 500 years' ago French? Where should be the cutting point of this fanciful freeze of the French language that so many of my contemporaries aspire to?

There is no doubt that should we have to speak a French which would be devoid of any foreign influence, then we should get back to the languages spoken by 'our ancestors the Gaul'! These languages were bastardised by Latin. Latin, here is the real enemy that we should combat! It is Latin which systematically and violently stole our language(s). And here dear reader, let me point to the sheer hypocrisy which consists in being on a pacifistic so-called invader's case, one that is not at war with us, whereas in our history classes we brainwash our children with a double-standard hypnotic admiration for the blood-thirsty Latin invaders who did not only assassinate and subdue us, but also murdered our languages. I am naturally being cheekily provocative here. My point is to show that this quest for immutable French is flagrantly absurd.

The truth is that this is jealousy laden. We are envious of a language which became dominant thanks to its peoples' academic, financial and commercial prowess. French, in the meantime, has become a 'normal' language, which is precisely what is driving mad a lot of my fellow French citizens who, as is so often the case, do not see the forest for the tree.

It is high time we stopped wailing and accepted our fate. More importantly, this 'Greatness' (*la Grandeur*) which is so important to us must be earned. It cannot be dictated and will definitely not be obtained through sniffles, which nobody outside our shores is interested in. Therefore, it is high time that we lead our students towards bilingualism, which has become indispensable not only for their individual career but also to France's *Grandeur*.