

Review of Robin Adamson (2007) *The Defence of French: A Language in Crisis?* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

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In this well-researched and carefully thought-out work Adamson explores legal, political and cultural dimensions of the defence of the French language and addresses the question as to whether French is in crisis. The author aims to explain the passionate engagement of the French with their language by discussing the historical and political background to attitudes to French today and provides consideration of the challenges that language policy-makers face in the 21st century.

As well as face to face discussion and interviews, she uses Internet resources to great effect as data for her study. Thus, a very interesting side-contribution is Adamson's demonstration of the advantages of the Internet and the opportunities it provides to develop new methods of research.

The book is 199 pages long and consists of an Introduction, six main and one conclusion chapter. The contents is both readable and wide-ranging, and would be of interest to linguists, policy-makers and lay persons alike.

The Introduction explains how French centralised political power and standardised education have jointly promoted the defence of the national language as an essential element of French identity since the Revolution. Adamson lays out a number of intriguing, seemingly dichotomous, but often overlapping, positions in France: between private groups and individuals on the one hand, and powerful government agencies (e.g. the *Académie Française*) on the other; between resigned *laissez-faire* linguists and calamity-claiming *résistants*; between those who prophesy the death of French and those who declare it to be in the best of health.

Chapter 1 explores the defence of French from medieval times to the present, and projects into the future. The author points out that the French language has always been integral to the power of France and wielded as a political tool. The defence of the language started as early as the 16th century and became institutionalised with the creation of the *Académie Française* in 1635. French was identified with liberty and progress during the Revolution, and in the 19th century affection and respect for the language were reinforced by centralised education, eventually resulting in both internal and external defensive movements.

Chapter 2 introduces contemporary preoccupations regarding the defence of French. It gives an overview of the legal underpinnings of

government promotion of French, from the *Loi Bas-Lauriol* (1975), through the change in the constitutional law in 1992, which added the phrase 'La langue de la République Française est le français' to the *Loi Toubon* (1994), with the explicit aim to safeguard the position of the French language in a variety of spheres of public life. Currently, Adamson suggests, the French are particularly concerned with maintaining and protecting their language, from anglophone influence especially, though at the same time they stubbornly neglect the issue of regional and minority languages within their own country. Here again a partial paradox emerges: there is pressure from the European Union to protect its minority linguistic heritage, while France itself is concerned with protecting its national language from foreign influence.

In Chapter 3, Adamson demonstrates that there is no shortage of resources for the protection of French: both funded mainstream and major official agencies exist, as well as many other more modestly endowed independent organisations, often aided by the Internet. Among the official agencies is the *Académie Française*, which was the first agency created to protect the French language and be involved in all linguistic matters. The *Alliance Française* is a friendship organisation aiming to 'respect civilisation', while motivated by foreign and colonial policy; *La Francophonie* works in defence of French, and particularly for its protection around the world.

Chapter 4 discusses the gradual disappearance of minority and regional languages around the 19th century, which led to an increased desire to defend them. A variety of conflicting linguistic interests and interest groups developed at this time. Yet, while the defenders of French are many and relatively powerful, the defenders of minority languages are relatively few and relatively weak for two main reasons. First of all, French in France is considered the sole language of social mobility, and if people have more than one language, it is usually English, which is widely used in the workplace. Secondly, the centralised education system has promoted French so successfully that many French citizens are willing to believe the situation for minority languages is already beyond hope. Therefore, regional languages are almost always only spoken at home and are accorded no other function than as identity markers. For many, French nowadays is no longer regarded as a colonial, persecutor-language, but is rather seen as the victim of English globalisation, so that two different linguistic insecurities are developing at the same time and competing with each other.

Chapter 5 compares the linguistic situation in France with that in neighbouring countries, providing a useful run-down of the language academies and their activities in a number of other countries. There is an extremely interesting table on page 139 comparing language protection and promotion in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the

United Kingdom, which reveals both similarities and differences and reinforces the fact that each country has to be treated differently on account of its own specific constellation of historical, political and cultural circumstances. A major conclusion here is that while *La Francophonie* is not unique, it certainly receives the greatest amount of official support for its activities. Where these countries have most in common is with the activities of their cultural institutes, the *Goethe Institut*, the *Instituto Cervantes*, the *Società Dante Alighieri* and the British Council working in a broadly similar fashion to the *Alliance Française*.

It is in Chapter 6 that Adamson truly gets to the heart of the contradictions and particular obsessions of the French with regard to the relationship between language and identity. She devotes some time to the 'croisade contre les emprunts' (crusade against (lexical) borrowing) and the advantages and disadvantages of a preoccupation with linguistic 'purity'. This chapter brings home the dangers – and the futility -- of governmental '*dirigisme*' with regard to language. Adamson carefully discusses in more detail the paradox of promoting the national language while ignoring the importance of multi- and plurilingualism within France. Citing Calvet (1992, 262) it is claimed 'l'intervention de l'État sur la langue dans l'intention de la 'purifier' ... [est] ... chauviniste à l'évidence et surtout, hélas, vouée à l'inefficacité' (obviously chauvinist and also, alas, certain to be ineffective) (p. 152). Adamson discusses the defensive posture the French assume against globalisation, and the tension between ancient sentiments of '*gloire*' and the benefits of being a modern, highly technological state. She provides a really insightful discussion of French rationalisation of some aspects of globalisation as (to them more positive) '*mondialisation*'.

The final chapter presents conclusions about the question of whether the various organs have been effective – even cost-effective in their defence of French, though the conclusions, are, like the tangle of facts they aim to summarise, not always entirely clear. In answering the question whether there is really a language crisis in France, Adamson maintains that contemporary arguments indicate rather that a change is taking place, that French is 'liberating' itself and becoming 'more democratic'. Furthermore, she argues, French is not '*un être fragile*', but a healthy language, whose vital signs are good and whose future is assured. A positive ending to a very positive reading experience.