

The rosy future of French in Lebanon

by Jean-Michel Druart

There are three reasons to examine the state of the French language in Lebanon. A general secretary for francophonie, who will coordinate the activity for 49 French-speaking nations across the world will soon be announced; president Jacques Chirac is seeking a specific French role in the Middle East; and Professor Selim Abou, the rector of the Université Saint Joseph, has completed a survey of the state of French culture in Lebanon.

What does the survey tell us?

Despite a setback in comparison with the colonial period, French is still a basic and distinctive feature of Lebanon in the region.

According to the investigations carried out by Professor Abou's St Joseph team between 1993 and 1995, French is relevant to some 53 per cent of the Lebanese population. Twenty per cent of the Lebanese speak it fluently; 19 per cent master it enough to get by, but have few opportunities to use it, while the remaining 14 per cent have kept a basic knowledge based on school recollections.

Although the association between France and the main Christian groups, especially the Maronites, may go back to the time of the Crusades, it is the educational framework of the last century – with the strong religious and confessional overtones of French missionaries – which has left a deep linguistic and cultural influence.

This may explain some recent misunderstandings between France and the Maronite community, which still makes up more than half of the French-speaking Lebanese. The majority of the French speakers have remained concentrated in the Beirut area, in the Kesrouan and in the Metn, but some interesting developments have recently changed the map of the regional dissemination of French.

For example, the rate of those who choose a French education has increased significantly

in the south. Half of the 6500 students at the al-Mustapha educational organisation, which is close to Hizbullah, have chosen French as their second language. Another example are the 3000 students at the Antonin sisters' school in Nabatiyye.

In a region where less than 20 per cent of the population is Christian, these figures are impressive, as is the particular emphasis put by France on promoting the language in the area: a French culture and language centre was re-opened in Sidon in 1993. The centre also organises French teacher training courses in Tyre and Nabatiyye, and some teachers have been invited to France to carry on advanced language teacher training.

A French lycée is scheduled to open in 1998 in order to fulfil the growing demand by Lebanese Shi'i families returning from French-speaking west Africa, whose children wish to continue their studies in French. As a result, the improved quality of French among 15 to 19-year-old Shi'is is remarkable, especially relative to other communities.

Also outside Beirut, an active French cultural centre is encouraged and supported by Walid Jumblatt in the Chouf mountains. The centre is located in the old palace of Fakhreddin in Deir al-Qamar. Considering the Druze community has traditionally been closer to English education and interests, the real success of the Chouf centre has gone beyond the most optimistic expectations, and its reputation has reached outside the country as a symbol of reconciliation between previously warring communities.

It is therefore not quite correct to focus on Lebanese francophonie as a Beirut-based phe-

nomenon. Francophonie has outgrown its original Christian milieu, leading to some eyebrows being raised by those Christians who would like to keep the monopoly over their privileged relationship with France. This sometimes leads to a paradox, with Christians moving their children's education toward English and some Muslims theirs towards French.

French cultural policy is often considered as a response, sometimes even a fight, against the English/American language influence. The French can behave like soldiers besieged in a castle, defending their positions against invaders. But if France is to be successful in maintaining and reinforcing its cultural position in Lebanon, it needs a new and modern approach.

It is a fact of life that English has become the dominant language for international business and computing. Any other language must accommodate

this, and tailor its role in consideration of local history and culture.

As such, Lebanon is a unique field for experimentation, as it helps French policymakers get rid of old devils and confusion about pointless competition with "Anglo-American culture". Nowhere is the debate more barren than in the vying for a dominant foreign language position in a country like Lebanon. Lebanon is an Arab country, and Arabic is the official, as well as the mother, language. To that extent, any other language comes at best second, and yet can be reinforced by the particular phenomenon of the strong trilingualism which Lebanon carries.

In Lebanon, more than perhaps anywhere else in the world, people tend to use three lan-

guages without any contrivance, depending on circumstances and practical interests. This is a cornerstone of Lebanese wealth. Many people will use English with non-Arabic or non-French speaking contacts, and may use French for specific occasions, notably when discussing cultural or social topics. If those acting for francophonie realise that language is first and foremost a tool of communication, and not a way to change a way of thinking, then a more practical approach to the uses of French in Lebanon may develop.

Francophonie must be ready to offer French as a further advantage to the largest number of Lebanese citizens, as well as to public and private corporations, so that the enhancement of the multi-faceted culture which is the characteristic of Lebanon within its Arab milieu is served by the French culture and language.

Since Lebanon, at least in part, is conversant with French, France could seize the opportunity to encourage the use of French in a certain number of applications, both in the intellectual and business fields. This use need not be antagonistic to English. Both French and English will help Lebanon regain its place on the international scene, and enhance its key position between the West and the Orient.

As the single official nation-state within the official structure of francophonie in the region, such a symbiosis of cultures and languages will even help the advancement of France among Arab countries and could be a way for these to perceive a more sophisticated message from the West.

Nor is the present article to be perceived differently: using English to call for a more modern, practical and efficient francophonie in Lebanon illustrates the need for a more open approach.

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