

PERIODS OF CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE POLICY IN FRANCE REGARDING THE FRENCH LANGUAGE¹

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Abstract

The objective of this research paper is to categorize the periods of contemporary language policy in France regarding the French language. For this purpose, we have conducted an analysis of several language-policy-related administrative units regarding the French language. According to the modes of work and acting of those institutions liable for its defense, we distinguish three periods of contemporary language policy: 1. 1966-1984 – The period of acting of *Haut comité pour la défense et l'expansion de la langue française*, 2. 1984-1989 – The period of acting of *Commissariat général de la langue française* and *Comité consultatif de la langue française* and 3. 1989-2001 – The period of acting of *Conseil supérieur de la langue française* and *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France*.

KEY WORDS: language policy, France, French language, periods

INTRODUCTION

A language policy encompasses all of the measures, plans or strategies aimed at regulating the status and form of one or more languages (Calvet 1993: 111-123, Calvet 1996: 3-9, Calvet 1999: 154-155, Calvet 2002: 15-16, Crystal 1999:190, Dubois 2001: 369). The

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scope of application and intervention that the Language Policy of France has regarding the French language comprises several areas: business life, information presentation to consumers, protection of workers, science and technology, language use at events, seminars, and congresses, as well as its use in magazines and publications. It also comprises the language state and use in education and science, in public services (both home and foreign affair services), and in mass media, and the language terminology enhancement (Saint Robert de 2000).

In order to categorize the periods of contemporary France language policy regarding the French language, we have analyzed a good number of administrative decisions concerning the French language (Николовски 2002: 101-118). On the grounds of the researched data, the point of contemporary language policy in France regarding the French language that we have determined as starting is year 1966, when the first institution for French language protection was founded – *Haut comité pour la défense et l'expansion de la langue française* (Décret n°66-203). It was with the establishment of this institution that France started to display a new and more systematic dimension in the French language protection and to develop a specific attitude towards it. We have made the categorization of language policy periods on the basis of the modes of work and courses of actions that the French language protection institutions have applied. The first period of acting is that of *Haut comité pour la défense et l'expansion de la langue française* (1966-1984), the second period is the period of the acting of *Commissariat général de la langue française* and *Comité consultatif de la langue française* (1984-1989), and the third one covers the period of acting by *Conseil supérieur de la langue française* and *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France* (1989-2001).

THE FIRST PERIOD OF FRANCE CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE POLICY REGARDING THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

The main aim of *Haut Comité pour la défense et l'expansion de la langue française* was applying measures both for protecting and spreading the language, establishing connections with the corresponding institutions, especially with those acting in the field of culture and technology, spurring initiatives with aims in accordance with the services of the respective institution and starting cooperation with all the others which provide services within the framework of the *Haut Comité* objectives. In 1973, the name of this institution was replaced with *Haut Comité de la langue française* (Décret n°73-194).

The language policy in this period has several courses: French language terminology enhancement; Protection of the consumer, Protection of the workers, Reinforcement of the position of the French language within the country and abroad; and spurring multilingualism.

Regardless of the fact that in the period 1970 - 1972, there had already been established specialized committees on terminology development within certain institutions in France, it was only in 1972 that a decree was issued for their officialization (Décret n°72-19, art. 2). Their task was the creation of new terms to fill up the terminology gaps in certain fields and areas or/and to replace the loan words with adequate French words. The new terms were to fully follow the morphological and syntactical rules of the French language, which would facilitate their acquisition and application. In the analysis of this period, we have noticed there were a good number of circular letters and administrative decisions issued regarding the terminology enhancement in many fields and areas. Evenmore, the Law on French Language Use – introduced in 1975 (Loi n°75-1349), emphatically reiterates replacing the foreign words and phrases with adequate French ones (*ibid.*, art. 1, 4, 5, 8.).

Before the flood of numerous products from all over the world which took hold of the French market in this period, France had already felt it was necessary to *protect its consumers* and its language from the foreign words intrusion. The Law on French Language Use – introduced in 1975, demanded that the French language was used in each label, offer, and presentation of goods or service, and avoidance of any foreign word or phrase but the ones already assimilated.

Aiming to *protect the workers* “Every written employment contract for work performed on the territory of France must be written in French language“(Code du travail, art. L. 121- 1). In the contracts, there must be no foreign expression incomprehensible for the native speakers, and in case it has been used, it must be clearly explained lest the contract signee be misled.

In this period, France applies an intensive language policy in the other fields as well. A good number of initiatives were started towards improvement of the language quality in public administration documents and in judiciary (Circulaire du 31 juillet 1974 and Circulaire du 14 juin 1983), the international cooperation with francophone countries was boosted as well as the efforts for spreading the French language in other countries worldwide via establishment of various organizations and subventions for language learning (Calvet 1999, 206).

One of the new courses within this period of France language policy regarding the French language is *encouraging multilingualism*. When

labelling, offering, and presenting goods or services, “every text in French language must be accompanied by translation into one or more foreign languages” (Loi n°75-1349, art. 1). This strategy is used to give an incentive for multilingualism both at the European and the global level as one of France’s future steps against the hegemony of the English language.

The first period of contemporary language policy of France regarding the French language is the basic period out of which the courses and strategies of the two following periods will emerge.

THE SECOND PERIOD OF FRANCE CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE POLICY REGARDING THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

We take the year 1984 as a determinant of the beginning of the second period of contemporary language policy of France regarding the French language, i.e. the year when the institutions of the previous period are replaced by *Comite consultatif de la langue francaise* and *Commissariat général à la langue française*.

The aim of *Comite consultatif de la langue francaise* is analysis of all the issues referring to the usage and promotion of the French language, spreading the Francophonia and the regional languages as well as to creating the policy of France regarding the foreign languages (Décret n°84-91, art. 2). This committee is also eligible to give suggestions, recommendations, and opinions on all issues either fully or partially related to its work and its legal authorities.

Commissariat général à la langue française has the objective of initiating and coordinating all of the language-related activities of the public and private organizations for the purpose of protecting and spreading the language (*Ibid.*, art. 6.). Consulting the *Commissariat* is compulsory for all ministires when their activities fall in the domain of its legal authority. It coordinates the terminology use and its application in the French language both within the country and on the international stage, and has cooperation network with the associations for promoting and protecting the French language.

The acting courses and strategies of the contemporary language policy of France regarding the French language mainly follow those of the previous period, but there are also some new ones.

The decree of 1972 regarding the *enhancement of the terminology* in the French language finally provides the expected results. Our analysis of the second period has detected new regarding the terminology enhancement in the fields of telecommunication, defence, urban

engineering, economics and finances, agriculture, water and air transport and traffic.

There is a noticeable *increase of contacts between France and Francophone countries* in this period, which significantly becomes intensified after the foundation of *Haut Conseil de la francophonie* (Décret n°84-171). The aim of this council is suggesting, directing, and encouraging the activities designed for spreading, enriching, and protecting the French language and for intensifying its usage world wide along with the francophone development.

In addition, we have detected that this period is marked with a *higher level of alert over the French language status in the audio-visual media*. This alert has also been one of the foci of the newly-established *Commission nationale de la communication et des libertés*, the task of which protecting and spreading the language in the French cinematography and radio broadcasting (Loi n°86-1067).

Ever since 1985, *French language competences testing* has been implemented for foreigners in the form of examinations certified with diploma (Arrêté du 22 mai 1985). Thereby, the level of the language command is determined and certified in accordance with generally accepted criteria in order to allow access to employment and position which require corresponding French language knowledge. The old courses of the contemporary language policy of France regarding the French language which proceeded from the Law on French Language Use – introduced in 1975, aiming at *multilingualism and protection of the consumer and the worker* constitute the second period as well. We have named that period the *period of coherence of public institutions* towards greater use and protection of the language.

THE THIRD PERIOD OF CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE POLICY OF FRANCE REGARDING THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

The third and last period begins in 1989 with the foundation of two new institutions: *Conseil supérieur de la langue française* and *Délégation générale à la langue française*.

Conseil supérieur de la langue française comprises the language usage, usage rule prescriptions, enrichment, enhancement and spreading in France, and the policy on foreign languages (Décret n°89-403, art. 2). It gives suggestions, provides forms of acting and opinions on all issues related to the French language, its usage in education, science, technology, new communication technologies, and mass media all over France. It also works on the elevation of the public awareness regarding

the national language and multilingualism, on strengthening the position of the French language in the Francophone countries and European institutions. Unlikely to its predecessor, it excludes the regional languages from its authority.

The mission of *Délégation générale à la langue française* consists of initiating and coordinating the activities of the public and private institutions which contribute to spreading and correct use of the French language in education, communication, science and technology (Décret n°89-403, art. 7). It supports all the initiatives coming from *Conseil supérieur de la langue française* (*idem*, art.9). In order to encompass the regional languages of France as well, in 2001 it changes its name into *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France* (Décret n°2001-646).

In our analysis, the third period of contemporary language policy of France regarding the French language shows increased mobility in France regarding the language. In the beginning of this period, the *Agence pour l'enseignement français à l'étranger* was founded with the top aim of *spreading the language at an international level* and encouraging foreign students to continue their education in France. It therefore is accountable for allocating financial help to institutions which contribute to spreading the French language abroad. (Loi n°90-588, art. 2, 7).

Intending to strengthen the position of the French language in the country and emphasizing this need via its sovereignty, in the year 1992, in its Constitution, France introduces the clause “French is the language of the Republic”². Thereby, *the status of the language is protected both internally and externally* which would later on prevent its minorization with the English language expansion.

Moreover, this is a period of alerting the public administration *for complying with the French language norm* which is to provide its correct usage in all administrative activities in the country and in the international relations.

Special emphasis is placed on the *French language application on Internet sites*. In the analysis of this period we have detected an increased number of administrative decisions referring to the compulsory use of the French language in this aspect, along with accompanying translation in one foreign language at least, in accordance with the objectives of the site itself. This course is in direct connection with the respect of *multilingualism on the Internet*.

Upon the fact that language is the key element for social integration of people, France intensifies its *fight against illiteracy* by organizing

²« La langue de la République est le français », Constitution du 4 octobre 1958, art. 2.

testing for determining the level of French language knowledge with young recruits (Loi n° 97-1019, art. L. 114-3). On the grounds of these results, the state takes additional measures for elevating the literacy and the level of the French language command with its citizens.

Due to the principle of gender equality, in the third period, the Feminization Policy is propelled through the use of specific forms of some nouns in feminine gender. Although already officialised (Circulaire du 11 mars 1986), with a circular letter in 1998 (Circulaire du 6 mars 1998), the feminine gender forms for nouns denoting certain professions or titles are once again prescribed to be used in all official documents of state institutions. Furthermore, *Commission générale de terminologie et de néologie* is assigned to conduct research on the same issue, whereas *Institut national de la langue française* to publish a brochure on the usage of feminine gender forms.

In this period, via several regulations and decrees, the state reacts to *establish the status of the language in the mass media and in cinematographic production*, and regularly monitors the state of affairs. In line with this aim, it brings about cooperation with institutions from the Francophone countries, and allocates financial help for the realisation of cinematographic and music productions in French language.

In this period, *Commission générale de terminologie et de néologie* and *Commissions spécialisées de terminologie et de néologie*, now known as Groupe d'experts, continue to work hard on the *enrichment of the French language* (Décret n°96-602). *Commissions spécialisées de terminologie et de néologie*, which are constituent parts of the respective ministries, prepare the newly created terms and submit them to the General Commission. If the French Academy has also agreed upon the new terms created by the specialised commissions, *Commission générale de terminologie et de néologie* analyzes them and approves their introduction and application. In order to acquire unanimity of the corresponding terminology used in the Francophone countries and international organizations, regular contact with their related institutions is cherished. In our analysis of this period, we have again detected a good number of new decisions on enriching the French language in different fields and areas.

We have also discerned permanent activity of the authorized *associations for protection of the French language* which carefully monitor the language state of affairs and submit regular reports to the *Délégation générale à la langue française*. According to the Law on the usage of the French language introduced in 1994 (Loi du 4 août 1994),

they are authorized to start a legal action against those who violate it (*ibid.*, art. 19 & Code de procédure pénale, art. 2-14).

The third period shows continuation of the previous courses of the contemporary language policy of France regarding the French language (protection of the worker and the consumer, encouragement to multilingualism and spreading the francophonia), now reinforced with the Law on the usage of the French language introduced in 1994 which has taken the place of the Law of 1975 because of its numerous weaknesses.

CONCLUSION

We have taken year 1966 as a starting point of the contemporary language policy of France regarding the French language because it is the year when *Haut comité pour la défense et l'expansion de la langue française* was founded giving a new systematic dimension to the protection of the French language and establishing a special stance towards this issue. As the objectives and responsibilities of the institutions in charge of protection and enhancement of the French language are changed and amended, so are the periods of contemporary language policy of France regarding the French language. We have three periods of contemporary language policy in France. Each period comprises specific features that mark them respectively, but there are features common for all three periods.

In order to maintain the language vitality despite the flood of numerous foreign words and the need for continual creation of new French ones to respond to the fast-changing world of the new time, special care has been taken regarding the *terminology enhancement of the French language*. Aside from the original objective which refers to *informing the consumer* and *protecting the worker*, emphasis has been placed on the state's intention to protect its language from the intrusion of foreign words, especially the English ones. A strong accent has been put on the use of the French language at *scientific gatherings and events* and in *scientific publications* as well as in *education*. These areas are the key columns of protection of the language and therefore have a special place in the language policy of France.

The *encouragement of multilingualism* in various areas of social life reflects the tendency of the state to provide protection from the English language hegemony and to promote the French language. For this purpose, France makes use of the *Internet, the mass media and the cinematographic and music production*, and boosts its *cooperation with*

the other Francophone countries and with EU and UN via promotion of the French language.

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