



By: *Harvey Morris*

France's latest skirmish in the war on global English



France is suing the Brussels-based European Commission, claiming aspects of its hiring process for new officials favour English-speaking applicants.

The démarche before the European Union's top court is the latest sortie in France's long-running war to halt the unrelenting advance of global English.

The French are particularly irked that the English language continues to predominate in the corridors of the EU bureaucracy seven years after their British neighbours voted narrowly to bail out. Even post-Brexit, some 90 per cent of EU legislation starts out in English.

In two legal complaints, Paris is protesting that tests given to applicants for EU jobs in defence, space and economics are only given in English. Its lawyers allege this infringes the EU's "duty to respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity and ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced."

The unspoken charge is that the onward march of international English is particularly damaging to French, which served as the lingua franca of diplomatic discourse well into the 20th century.

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The cases against Brussels come at a time when President Emmanuel Macron has been seeking to reassert the status of the language of Molière both at home and abroad.

At a summit in Tunisia at the end of last year of the 88 Francophonie states, representing more than 320 million French speakers, he acknowledged it was in retreat.

This October, he inaugurated the new City of the French Language at a former royal

residence north of Paris. Lauding the French language for having built the unity of the nation, he said the new institution would help to underline the political role it played and would continue to play tomorrow.

Macron acknowledged it was a language that did not belong only to the French. Spoken on five continents, it remained the favoured vernacular of those around the world who loved "libert".

Despite the unspoken implication that the universality of French arose from the revolutionary barricades, its global reach stems, like that of English, from centuries of imperial hegemony.

Yet while the French regard their language as a central element of the national patrimony, laissez faire native English speakers - whether British, American, Australian or African - tend to have a more blasé and less proprietorial attitude to theirs.

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A recent British study by Essex University researchers suggested that even the Royal Family do not speak the King's English any more, while young Londoners have adopted a multicultural dialect that reflects the patois and accent of the once colonial Caribbean.

While French mostly stood its ground against the language of its British neighbours and imperial rivals, the 20th century rise of American English, through US dominance in media, technology and international politics, has put English firmly at the summit of the global linguistic heap.

In the face of this monolingual takeover, the French have long been mounting a gallant rearguard action to stave off linguistic defeat.

The court action against Brussels is not without precedent. In 2006, General Electric Medical Systems was fined more than half a

million euros in a French court for failing to translate documents used by its employees.

That case was brought under the so-called Toubon Law which in 1994 enforced the use of French in government-financed schools, official publications, advertisements, workplaces and beyond.

It has been an uphill battle ever since, not least in the face of those back-sliding natives who insist on adopting one-word anglicisms where a phrase in French would do.

The Commission for the Enrichment of the French Language earlier this year published a list of suggested phrases to replace widely used anglicisms. Why should the French say “replay”, its official journal demanded, when they could opt for “service de rattrapage”?

Ditto for “coliving” in a flat share – just say “habitat partagé”! And why say “fanfiction”, when you can say “fiction de fan”?

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Reactions to the commission’s latest diktat indicated the public is not entirely convinced by this effort to invent French phrases to replace perfectly good words that already exist in Français.

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France’s language nationalists might be seen as expressing a moral panic in the face of inevitable decline. But do Macron and his more fervent compatriots have a valid point?

They would argue that importing words also means importing attitudes – in the case of Anglo-American, attitudes that reflect a bias

towards unrestrained capitalism, consumerism, anti-intellectualism and lowbrow entertainment.

The dominance of a single language can help to grease the wheels of commerce and bureaucracy and yet fail to enhance deeper global understanding.

English might be the linguistic victor, but increasingly monolingual Britons and Americans may at the same time be denying themselves a subtler appreciation of the outside world.

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Some academics have designated English as the world’s only hypercentral language, not only as the most widely spoken but also because of its dominance in science, literature, business, and law.

In this language pyramid, France occupies a respectable second place as a supercentral language alongside the likes of French, Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin.

But how long will that last in a changing world? At the height of the Cold War, it used to be said that optimists studied Russian while pessimists studied Chinese, reflecting a perception that China would one day emerge as the global superpower.

Would international English then be consigned to the linguistic scrap heap? Doubtful, given that Latin survived the collapse of the Roman Empire by a thousand years to serve as the bureaucratic language of much of Europe.

English, French and a host of tongues will continue to adapt and evolve despite the vagaries of geopolitics. Long may they all prosper and vive la différence.