Post-Francophonie?

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Résumés, Abstracts

Du même auteur, un point de vue sur l'Atlas mondial de la francophonie.

Every year, on March 20th[1], Francophonie is celebrated throughout the world, even if no one is able to clearly define what this institution/space/community refers to. It perhaps seems strange to raise the Francophone issue in English. Yet, it seems to me that it is the easiest way to stand back from the inevitable French bias that pervades debates about Francophonie. Furthermore, writing in English is also a way to draw the attention of some French readers, who easily denounce Anglo-American colonialism but fail to acknowledge a potential French colonialism through Francophonie.

According to Léopold Sédar Senghor,

'Francophonie is a complete Humanism, weaving its way around the world: a symbiosis of the ''latent energies'' of all the continents, of all the races, reawaken by their complementary warmth' (1962: 844).

This quote reveals the 'great ambiguity' (Léger, 1987) of Francophonie: it is almost always presented as a positive universalism, a utopian vision of a world

where the French language is shared and not imposed; but this universalism is rarely questioned. Francophonie refers to a space where people speak French since colonisation and to an organisation created during decolonisation whose aim is to promote the French language and a certain culture. Thus one can question its very *post*-colonial nature. Is it a simple conceit, a groundless claim of turning away from colonisation? Or is it actually a witty expression, an elaborate way towards a 'complete Humanism'? Does that notion overlook any neo-colonialist practice? In a word, how does Francophonie go beyond colonialism?

To construct a postcolonial reading of Francophonie, one has to avoid at least four traps. First, reducing *present* Francophonie to a mere legacy of colonial past would reassert a colonial vision and ignore contemporary rapid evolutions (Parker, 2003). The aim is to avoid 'that all that came before colonialism becomes its own prehistory and whatever comes after can only be lived as infinite aftermath' (Ahmad, 1995: 6-7). Secondly, the lyricism and the optimistic *rhetoric* of Francophonie's advocates have to be deconstructed so as not to overlook any neo-colonial dimension. Thirdly, the adjective 'francophone' has to be *decolonised*, since it is often used in France for everything that is written in French but that is not French, reinstating an imperial dichotomy between France and 'the rest'. Fourthly, the huge *diversity* of Francophone spaces needs to be taken into account to avoid any imperial homogenisation.

In order to explore the question, the four meanings of Francophonie identified by Deniau (1998) — its institutional, linguistic, geographical, and what Deniau calls 'mystical', dimensions — are scrutinized. The first part of the article questions the institutional meaning, Francophonie as an organisation. Historical and political lenses are adopted to evaluate the legacy of colonisation in Francophonie's history, objectives and practices. The second part, based on linguistic lenses, focuses on the allegiance to a language promoted by Francophonie. That linguistic dimension of Francophonie raises the question of bringing together this allegiance to a language and the quest for 'decolonising the mind' (Ngugi, 1986). The third part scrutinizes the geographical meaning — Francophonie as the space of French speakers. Cultural lenses allow us to highlight the ambiguities of the universal space of diversity claimed by Francophone ideology. In the conclusion the mystical meaning of Francophonie, that is to say the sense of

belonging it promotes, is questioned.

The Organisation of Francophonie: evaluating the legacy of colonisation.

Many reasons strengthen the idea that Francophonie is clearly *post*-colonial. Obviously the spread of the French language is a legacy of French colonisation in America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and of Belgian and French colonisations in Africa, Indochina and Polynesia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. French, spoken by colonists and local elites, was quickly imposed on the rest of the population; today, 113 million people across the five continents speak French. Interestingly, it was also during colonisation that the geographer Onésime Reclus (1880) coined the very word 'Francophonie' to name the space where people speak French, a linguistic and geographical group (Tétu, 1988). However, the website of the French Foreign Office mentions that 'today Francophonie is free from such a colonial connotation' (Quai d'Orsay, 2006: 1). It recalls Boutros Boutros-Ghali's assertion: 'Francophonie is born from a desire felt outside France' by former colonised themselves (*Le Monde,* 2 December 1995). The African presidents Léopold Sédar Senghor (Senegal), Hamani Diori (Niger) and Habib Bourguiba (Tunisia) *both* fought for the independence of their countries and became the main instigators of Francophonie by calling for a conference of Francophone countries in Niamey on March 20th 1970 (hence Francophonie Day every year on March 20th). At that time, France — the former coloniser — was even reluctant to promote a Francophone community. It would be unfair to reduce Francophonie to a mere colonial legacy. Moreover, among the 49 member states of the Organisation of Francophonie, all of them are not former French or Belgian colonies; Bulgaria, Canada and Egypt, for instance, are full members.

But the idea that Francophonie goes *beyond* colonialism can still be questioned, especially in the ways the Organisation of Francophonie works. Officially the Organisation promotes the French language, democracy and Human Rights, development and cultural diversity, and other praiseworthy intentions such as peace and education. In practice, the attitude of France has changed since 1986

with the First Francophonie International Summit in Paris. Firstly, France is the main financial backer: she provides two thirds of the Multilateral Funds (Tavernier, 2000: 91), and therefore she controls the main funds of Francophonie. Moreover France has imposed the last two Secretary-Generals against the wishes of a majority of members, even if Francophonie claims to promote democracy:

‘The imposition of Boutros-Boutros Ghali as ‘‘elected’’ Secretary-General [in 1997], and the withdrawal of the alternative candidate (former President Zinsou of Benin), provoked a near rebellion by African countries, who saw Chirac’s realisation of his personal promise to the former Secretary-General of the United Nations as one more proof of the continuing strength of the ‘‘old ways’’ ’ (Ager, 1999: 189).

In 2002, again, France imposed Abdou Diouf as the new Secretary-General in spite of the candidacy of Henri Lopes (Congo) backed by the majority of African countries. France appears to be too big a ‘partner’ for the other members, who often depend on her (Jones et alii, 1996: 37). To avoid accusations of neo-colonialism, France strongly backs the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad) since it is presented as an African initiative: ‘We are determined to contribute actively toward the implementation of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development’ (Quai d’Orsay, 2002: 6). But Nepad‘s liberal framework is blurred by promoting increased global integration and rapid private sector growth as ‘the answer to overcoming poverty, and by its failure to engage with Africa’s people to transform the continent’ (South African Council of Churches, 2002: 2). Lastly, the scheme of development promoted by Francophonie strengthens the idea that the West knows best, that western countries have solutions for the countries of the South. Thus the Organisation considers that: ‘northern countries have managed to develop a *rational* use of energy after the oil crisis, whereas countries from the South have not reacted *at all* in an *appropriate* way’ (Agence de la Francophonie, 2002: 139, emphasis added). A French official report also concludes, about a project in Lebanon where France sends an expert to develop vineyards in Bekaa, that: ‘a developed Francophonie fosters the settling of our [sic] companies’ (Tavernier, 2000: 113)!

Thus, historical and political perspectives adopted here enable us to evaluate the legacy of colonisation in Francophonie's history, objectives and practices. Even if the Organisation has non-metropolitan origins and claims to go beyond colonialism, France cannot be fully acquitted of negative neo-colonial ramifications. Yet Francophonie bases its claim to be *post*-colonial on its refusal of any allegiance to a sovereign, preferring an allegiance to a language.

Swearing allegiance to a language or 'decolonising the mind'?

How is it possible to unite this allegiance to the French language and the postcolonial quest for 'decolonising the mind'? On the one hand, Senghor, Césaire and Francophone writers consider the French language as 'a marvellous tool' (Senghor, 1962: 844) to bring together different cultures and to let them communicate. On the other hand one cannot ignore that such allegiance appears alienating.

Francophonie is sometimes presented as a French Commonwealth. Indeed, the Congolese linguist Ntole Kazadi opposes the Commonwealth, defined as 'a community of allegiance to a sovereign' — the British monarch — and Francophonie, considered as 'a community of allegiance to a language' (Kazadi, 1991: 56, quoted in Parker, 2003: 94). Others add that the Commonwealth is not based on a linguistic dimension, that economic or political issues largely overlook linguistic questions (Tétu, 1988: 246), and that the Commonwealth is composed of only former territories of the British Empire. This attractive comparison for Francophonie can be criticized in two ways. Firstly, the British monarch is more the symbolic head of the Commonwealth than the 'sovereign' of this association; and the organisation is no longer limited to former territories of the British Empire since the accession of Mozambique in 1997. Secondly, the advocates of Francophonie seem to forget that allegiance to a language appears *alienating*. During colonisation, French was used as a tool of subjection as expressed by the French socialist leader Jean Jaurès in 1884:

‘Our colonies will only be French in their understanding and their heart when they understand French… For France above all, language is the necessary instrument of colonisation… More new French schools, to which we shall invite the natives, must come to help the French settlers, in their difficult task of moral conquest and assimilation… when we take possession of a country, we should take with us the glory of France, and be sure that we will be well received, for she is pure as well as great, imbued with justice and goodness’ (quoted in Ager, 1999: 238).

This quote is particularly close to the assertion of Ngugi wa Thiong’o: ‘the domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized’ (Ngugi, 1986: 16). Today, Francophonie is criticised because of this mental domination due to the fact that the inhabitants of Francophone countries cannot define themselves as they want. The Francophonie Organisation gathers together very different countries according to their use of French, whatever the language represents to them:

‘To be considered ‘‘French-speaking’’, it suffices that you come from a country ‘‘where French is spoken’’, even if, personally, you do not use that language… Here we are, forever confined within the wall of French. No further possibility of defining ourselves in relation to ourselves. To move towards others, and to move towards ourselves, francophonie is the road we have to take. It is our present and our future… Yes, francophonie expects from each ‘‘francophone’’ in Africa that he should proclaim painlessly at all times and in all places: ‘‘My Motherland is the French language’’. As can be seen, for us Africans, it is truly a matter of denial’ (Midiohouan, 2000: 3).

Nevertheless, Senghor and Césaire celebrated French language through *négritude*, asserting Black identity through French. Beyond the racialist ambiguities of *négritude* (Ahluwalia, 2001), it must be admitted that Senghor and Césaire rejected any alienation through language. That is maybe why the question of alienation through language is strangely rarely raised in debates on Francophonie. Senghor and Césaire were able to transcend the language of the

coloniser from its metropolitan origins and to appropriate it thoroughly. It is particularly clear in *Return to My Native Land* when Césaire claims: ‘Qui ne me comprendrait pas ne comprendrait pas davantage le rugissement du tigre’2 (Césaire, 1956: 21).

To conclude on this linguistic dimension, allegiance to French cannot be reduced to a question of alienation. Of course, it is true that language maybe is not the absolute origin of alienation, but it is a powerful support: ‘to speak is to exist absolutely for the other… The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter — that is, he will come closer to being a real human being — in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language’ (Fanon, 1967: 17-18). However, the sometimes alienating rhetoric of the Francophonie Organisation can still be distinguished from the personal freedom to adopt a language. The question of alienation through language is maybe raised less according to a metropolitan/colonial dichotomy than to a dichotomy between state membership to Francophonie and personal allegiance to a language. Moreover, Francophonie aims at promoting cultural and linguistic diversity throughout a universal and diverse world space, thus partly avoiding criticisms of linguistic imperialism.

A space of ‘francopolyphony’: universality questioned.

This section explores the geographical meaning of Francophonie. Francophonie is presented as the space of French speakers, which contributes to promoting a universal space of cultural and linguistic diversity. Such an idea is not free from ambiguities, because the very notion of a space of universality does not fit easily with the assertion of a space of diversity.

The Francophonie Organisation claims that French is a universal language, spread around the world, and carrying universal values, such as democracy and cultural diversity. Of course democracy can be promoted in English or in Wolof and, although it is often repeated that the Rights of Man were first proclaimed in French, there are notorious dictatorships among the Francophone countries. It is more difficult to disagree with the notion of a universal cultural diversity. How can one be opposed to a culturally diverse world? ‘Francophonie […] deserves to be

defended; it sustains cultural diversity' (Tavernier, 2000: 184). But France backs cultural diversity mainly to protect her own culture and language, seen as dangerously threatened by English and American culture (Ager, 1999). Against an Anglo-Saxon *globalisation*, France uses Francophonie to promote *universality* , 'the pedigree of French' (Parker, 2003: 98). It is a way to construct a postcolonial reading: rather than focusing on past French colonialism, let us focus on today's American cultural imperialism and promote the French language, since it has a tactical position, 'strong enough to gather, weak enough not to be world dominating' (Cerquiglini et al., 2000: 396). Thus the French Foreign Office rejoices that Francophonie 'helps the countries from the South to structure their mind [*sic*]' (Quai d'Orsay, 2006: 4) to back the French position on cultural diversity!

Despite the official francophone claim for cultural and linguistic diversity in the world, that very diversity is refuted in French and especially in France. The French Academy controls the French language and refuses, for instance, words accepted in Belgium or Quebec, or words from African contexts. For example, the Academy has refused the African verb '*girafer*' (to giraffe), which refers to a tall pupil copying the work of a smaller one by looking over him or her. Moreover, a strict unilinguism has been applied in France during decades: regional languages are not officially accepted, even in the overseas departments. Thus there is a scale conflict: linguistic diversity is proclaimed by the Francophonie Organisation throughout the world but is not fully accepted in France. An imperial dichotomy between France and other Francophone countries is reinstated. However, France has started to slightly modify her policy towards regional languages *because of Francophonie*, to put Francophonie arguments into practice (Parker, 2003). However, this is a work in progress.

To find the lost purity of Francophonie ambition, new concepts have emerged, such as 'francopolyphony' or 'diversality' (Parker, 2003: 100) — a mix of diversity and universality. Some writers want to promote a forthcoming and truly open French language, a 'plural Francophonie' (Diagne-Bonané, 2000: 384). But it may be seen as a new intellectual utopia, which overlooks neo-colonial hegemonies. To conclude, the geographical meaning of Francophonie is problematic, because it homogenises very different spaces under an ambiguous

statement of cultural universality through linguistic diversity. One can then question the sense of belonging promoted by Francophonie, known as its ‘mystical’ meaning (Deniau, 1998).

Francophonie and the notion of ‘power’.

Has the sharing of a language the power to found a sense of belonging? Can a collective identity and a ‘mystical’ meaning be predicated on a notion such as Francophonie? The problem is that using language as a universally essential element of identity would reduce national identities to their past colonial experience: ‘To claim the English-speaking or French-speaking heritage, as is done in Cameroon for example, seems… absurd because one then wonders whether it is possible to define Cameroonity beyond various imperialisms’ (Kom, 2000: 4). Some authors thus propose to distinguish ‘*francités*’ and ‘ *Francophonies*’ (Cahen, 1998: 128), the latter referring to spaces where French language is just a tool of communication (African countries…), the former to entities where the use of French is a strong element of national, ethnic or communal identity (Quebec, France, Brussels…). It is clear that other members of Francophonie absolutely do not share the French ideology of a coincidence of linguistic and cultural identity with political spaces. For most of them French is only one language among others and they experience diverse modalities of hybridity.

How does Francophonie go beyond colonialism? Institutionally, the Francophonie Organisation is not free from neo-colonial practices, in spite of its non-metropolitan origins and its original praiseworthy ambitions. From a linguistic point of view, the Senghorian idea of going beyond colonialism through a shared language seems to remain more an intellectual utopia than a rooted reality among the peoples. The geographical meaning of Francophonie — as a space of cultural universality through linguistic diversity — is not convincing in its attempts to homogenise spaces that are too different, and it does not fully transcend the imperial dichotomy between France and the others. The word *francophone* remains to be decolonised.

At the same time, Francophonie can be a spur to a postcolonial framework being ‘sensitive to its limits, its absences and to the possibility of its displacement’ (Sidaway, 2000: 606), especially concerning the notion of power used. If one considers power relations, a neo-colonial interpretation is easily adopted. Power is understood as *strength*, and Francophonie appears as a postcolonial conceit, a perverted pretension to go beyond colonialism. However if one focuses on the evolution of Francophonie, on a positive ideology in process, it offers an original way of going beyond colonialism *if* languages are freely chosen and identities freely articulated. Power is then understood as an *ability* to go beyond traditional dichotomies. In this sense Francophonie is a witty expression to fight cultural uniformity and to create a space of dialogue. But such a perspective fits with difficulty into a postcolonial framework. How could any attempt to go beyond colonialism — which is still spread over several continents — not be trapped by suspicions of neo-colonialism? The limitations of Francophonie reflect those of post-colonial theories.

Résumé

This article intends to construct a postcolonial reading of Francophonie. Considered through its institutional, linguistic and geographical dimensions, and as a sense of belonging, Francophonie is critically evaluated throughout the paper. Even if the International Organisation of Francophonie has non-metropolitan origins and claims to go beyond colonialism, France cannot be fully acquitted of negative neo-colonial ramifications. The difficult articulation between the allegiance to the French language and the postcolonial quest for ‘decolonising the mind’ is underlined. Finally, the geographical meaning of Francophonie – as a space of cultural universality through linguistic diversity – is not convincing in its attempts to homogenise spaces that are too different. Francophonie does not fully transcend the imperial dichotomy between France and the others. One can then question the sense of belonging promoted by Francophonie.

Notes

1 The International Francophonie Day (*Journée mondiale de la Francophonie*) is organised every year, on the 20th of March, in memory of the Niamey conference. This conference, held on the 20th of March 1970, led to the creation of the Acct (*Agence de coopération culturelle et technique*) ancestor of the International Organisation of Francophonie. The International Francophonie Day gives the opportunity to celebrate French language and the International organisation of Francophonie throughout the world.
2 'Whoever would not understand me would not understand any better the roaring of tigers' (own translation from Césaire, 1956: 21).

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