The Effects of France’s Language Protection Laws

On French Media

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Communication Studies and French
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Over the past few centuries, English has been spreading like wild fire; however, not all countries welcome this invasion. In fact, France, which prides itself on the preservation of its language, has installed governmental and cultural barriers to keep other languages out, in order to uphold the purity of its mother language. The former president of France, Jacques Chirac, supports the preservation of the French language and its integrity; he states: "Nothing would be worse for humanity than to move toward a situation where we speak only one language."¹ I propose to study one particular component of this desired preservation—its effect on the French media. In order to protect the language in the media, a field that can easily promote “Anglicisms”, the French government installed regulations (the Loi Toubon) specifically for the media to ensure they were using the French language over foreign vocabulary. In my research project, I will examine the regulations placed on the media in France and analyze the methods the media may employ in order to circumvent regulations and fines. This analysis will serve as an example of whether an overt governmental protection of the language affects the media’s ability to communicate freely with the people, an issue that has been brought up by the creation of the Loi Toubon.

The Loi Toubon was passed in 1994, written by the French Cultural Minister, Jacques Toubon. This law states that any government entities, broadcast media and advertising companies who use foreign words where suitable “French equivalents” exist will be fined $1,800 and sentenced to prison terms. A few years later, a subsequent law out of the Cultural Minister’s office, regulates that forty percent of the songs played on

FM radio stations in France must be *French* songs. The basis of these regulations is focused on the government’s desire to use exclusively French lexicon.

According to Marcel Machill, “Today, [the Loi Toubon] interferes with the language used on radio and TV—as per decree, lists of specialist French words designed as a replacement for Anglicisms are drawn up (503).” ² Over the past century, the rise of English has begun to threaten French’s purity and much has been done to limit this infiltration. However, because this is a rather recent development, few scholars have studied the effects of such regulations—particularly the Loi Toubon. Marcel Machill, cited above, is one scholar who has explicitly addressed the effects in his article *Background to French Language Policy and its Impact on the Media*. He relates the historical tendencies of the French government in preserving their culture to that of pre-Revolutionary France; he incorporates an analysis of the effects of the Loi Toubon on the French television and radio industries. Another pair of scholars, Phillip Gordon and Sophie Meunier, discuss in their article, *Globalization and French Cultural Identity*, the effects of globalization on France and resultant shifts in various aspects of cultural structure. Ranging from the economy to culture identity to food to language, Gordon provides an interesting macro-analysis of French language regulation and how globalization is affecting various parts of the French cultural identity. ³ My own research expands on this scholarship by attending specifically to particular ways in which the media may attempt to evade certain regulations, such as fines. Because my focus is on a

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specific aspect of the regulations, as opposed to a global one, I will be able to provide a more concrete micro-analysis of the regulations.

In order to execute my research, I will be conducting interviews and surveys in France, during my stay in Nantes. My field methods are largely qualitative—focusing on French media employees (namely newspapers and television news stations). However, certain methods I employ will allow me to quantify data to use in my analysis. I hope to establish a contact at a local newspaper or television station with the help of a Northwestern Medill Dean, Janice Castro. The bulk of my questions will be focused on overall effects of the regulations and consequent actions taken in order to get around specific rules. The interviews and surveys will be spaced out over the first three months I am there in order to allow time to fill in any gaps in my research with follow-up interviews. After conducting the interviews, I will code them and combine this analysis with my survey responses, comprising all of my field research. In order to further my understanding and knowledge of the language laws, I will do more scholarly journal research with French resources, which will add to my review of the current situation and analysis of the Loi Toubon.

In preparation for this research I have taken several courses that have each given me certain skills that will aid in the research process. In addition to the Study Abroad Research Program, I have taken Communication Research Methods, which guided me through the entire social science research process in theory, without actually performing research. Also, I have reached the 4th year of advanced-level French here at Northwestern as well as 4 years of high school French, giving me a solid foundation for conducting my interviews and writing my surveys. Moreover, I am familiar with French culture beliefs,
which will aid in my understanding of these laws and French society. This preparation provides a springboard for conducting my own successful field research in a foreign country.

My findings on the Loi Toubon will provide a more generalized understanding of the effects of the language regulations on the media community. France is one of the few countries with governmental laws protecting its language. My research will provide a better understanding of the outcome of explicitly regulating language within a society—something that can be applied to all countries with similar language regulations, whether they be explicit or not. More importantly, my research will provide a current example of the efficacy of language regulations and success of enforcement of said regulations. My findings will provide a microanalysis of the macro-issue: French language preservation; insight into this more specific component will provide a better understanding of the situation as a whole. By focusing an a particular issue, such as the way the media may attempt to circumvent certain regulations, I will better understand a tangible aspect of the regulation, as opposed to more generalized and abstract “results” of the regulation. The analysis of the outcomes of the Loi Toubon, when compared to their theoretical purpose, will provide an understanding of how effective the French have been in maintaining their “Frenchness”, both in the French media and in French society as a whole.
BUDGET

1. Lodging at hostel in Paris for several days to conduct interviews: $75

2. Recording equipment: $40

3. Transportation around Paris/Nantes for research and interview opportunities: $25

4. Computer printing: $5

5. Writing supplies: $4

6. **TOTAL: $149**
ADDENDUM

There are several preparation aspects of my project I will accomplish before I depart for France to complete my research. Margaret Sinclair has put me in contact with a Medill Dean, Janice Castro, who has many contacts in the journalism community in France. She has agreed to set-up a few connections before I leave, so that when I arrive, I can begin my research process as soon as possible. Having a few “ins” in the journalism community will greatly aid the interview process and expand my pool of interviewees.

I also plan to continue researching and reading materials on my topic this summer, both French and English sources. I have mainly been looking at English research and articles thus far; however, I would like to begin familiarizing myself with French sources on the topic, which will better prepare me to discuss the issue in France. Researching further will help me stay on top of any developments that may arise over the summer as well as give me a greater foundation and understanding for my topic.

When I arrive in France, I will be conducting the research on my own; my program does not have a research component built into the curriculum. However, by creating a research timeline, I will easily be able to stay on top of my schedule, which will allow me to complete everything I need to complete before returning to America.

When I return from France, I would like to turn my research into a senior thesis and possibly publish an excerpt in a Communications journal. I am open to any possibilities that may present themselves as I work on this project. Also, if I find that there is more to be studied, I would love to return to France and continue my research next summer or after graduating.
The Study Abroad Office has permission to post my proposal on their Web site and to use it in future SARP programs or other programs or courses related to study abroad.