What good is a supercentral language? Justificatory repertoires for the projection of French, 1998-2018
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Abstract

The article focuses on shifts in justificatory repertoires within France for the promotion of the French language beyond the regions of the world where it is securely the core language. It is based on a corpus of 19 French public policy reports on external language and cultural policies published between 1998 and 2018. The corpus is characterised by a thick referential interplay, and its authors work within a loose and evolving advocacy coalition. The reports suggest that France's position as a "supercentral" world language is characterised by significant fragility, and that its defenders must break with former representations of French as a prestigious language of culture and diplomacy. They argue that it must "equip" itself as a manifestly useful, broadly attractive and polycentric language in a new geolinguistic space. At an initial level, they attempt to justify its external projection by framing French with its specific attributes and reach as a sui generis global public good. They supplement this stock of justifications by invoking a privileged role for French in the defence of the second-order global public good of linguistic diversity as such. These discursive moves produce both ruptures and continuities in relation to the French cultural and language policy traditions of rayonnement and universalism.

Keywords

French language policy, French cultural policy, world language system, rayonnement, francophonie, language diplomacy, supercentral languages, lingua franca

Introduction

France is well known for its commitment to the projection of its language abroad, and indeed has acquired among outside observers "the reputation of being the country with the most well-resourced and polished language promotion policy across the world" (Ammon 2015, 1150). Questions regarding the language's international reach and future have been extensively treated in academic analysis (Calvet 2017, Wright 2016, Candea and Véron 2019), presidential speeches (Chirac 2002, Macron 2018), and opinion pieces in the general French media. However, changes in the world language system have made the projection of French as an international lingua franca much less self-evident than it once was. Its defenders and champions have had to develop new discursive repertoires of reasons that might justify the investment by others in learning and using the language. The purpose of the present article is not to provide a full description of France's institutional apparatus and established policies for the projection of its language abroad, but rather to explore the emergence of these new justificatory repertoires.[1] I will begin by summarising briefly the changes in the world language system that have affected the international promotion of French along with other 'supercentral languages', and by presenting the specific corpus of policy reports I will use to explore the new discursive repertoires in question.

In de Swaan's influential model (2001), world language systems have historically been held together by asymmetrical patterns of bilingualism connecting smaller language communities to wider linguistic groupings. He distinguishes between peripheral (subnational), central (mostly national), and supercentral (supranational) languages. For our present epoch, he adds a fourth category with just one member to designate the "hypercentral" language that is contemporary English. The languages whoses statuses are most vulnerable to the consolidation of this hypercentral language are not, as is sometimes assumed, the peripheral and central languages, but rather the "supercentral" languages (Arabic, Spanish, Swahili, Portuguese, French…) which have historically fulfilled lingua franca functions between native speakers of different central languages. The process is not necessarily gradual, as self-confirming "stampedes" to one lingua franca can provoke the erosion and then "collapse" of another across given regions. Many agents look to resist the spread of the hypercentral langauge on principle as a means of preserving the world's linguistic diversity and resisting the flattening effects of cultural homogenisation. The case, however, is not straightforward to advance. Not only are there powerful economic, political, technological and cultural factors behind the contemporary self-reinforcing spread of Engish. There are also strong practical factors associated with the pervasive micro-dynamics of lingua franca choice - the most potent of these being probably the "maxi-min" dynamic according to which a multilingual group will tend to select the language whose weakest speaker has the highest proficiency compared to the weakest speakers of other languages.[2] Indeed, it is possible to make an ethical case for accelerating the global spread of English as the most effective means to give all people access to wide-ranging information and a "global megaphone" (Van Parijs 2011). It is therefore no longer self-evident to justify strategies to expand the translinguistic role of existing "supercentral" languages. What specific "good" can be be secured by such strategies, attaching either to an individual language, or more generally to the horizon of a plural lingua franca regime for the world? Of all the supercentral langauges, the status of French has perhaps been most abruptly challenged by the stampede to English (Wright 2016, 134-154). This gives a particular relief to the justificatory work undertaken across our corpus and the argumentative repertoire which its authors collectively develop.

In this article, I will explore how this justificatory work has crystallised across a specific discursive pocket of French political life that is less prominent than some of the academic, political or media treatments signalled above, but which nonetheless probes the issues with considerable depth and subtlety. This is a body of reports on external language and cultural policies produced between 1998 and 2018. The principal source for these reports are the specialised Commissions for Culture and the Media or for Foreign Affairs of the Republic's three constitutional assemblies: the National Assembly, the Senate, and the Economic, Social and Environmental Council. These are supplemented by relevant reports produced by other standing or ad hoc commissions within France's governmental apparatus. I have not, however, used the reports on the relevant components of the annual "Projet de loi de finances" produced by the National Assembly and Senate commissions, as these more routinised documents are less richly researched and discursively elaborated, and the existing corpus is already rather voluminous for treatment in a single article. The corpus as a whole is characterised by quite a thick referential interplay, and numbers 19 reports (see section A, 'primary corpus', in the list of references; all translations are my own).

There is a certain broad overlapping consensus across the reports in the corpus, and not simply due to the cross-party or at least bipartisan mode of their elaboration. Agents who gravitate to the commissions in question and then to the role of rapporteurs tend to invest the issue of France's extraterritorial linguistico-cultural action with particular importance (this produces at times a strangely beleaguered feel to the reports, as their authors frequently suggest that linguistic issues are being persistently neglected across France's more general circles of power). They also tend to become over time well-informed political specialists in the area, which for the most part takes them beyond caricatural or narrowly "gallocentric" defences of the national language. They act within

what policy analysts might call a loose "advocacy coalition"– a term used to denote policymaking clusters of diverse actors with overlapping core policy beliefs working across different sites of government within specific policy subsystems for periods of a decade or more, in conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty, and combining in varying doses expert deliberation and politicised debate (Sabatier and Weible 2007). However, due especially to the above-mentioned external shifts in the world language system, the defence of an international role for their language across the period in question is no longer self-evident for these agents, and this makes their extensive reports particularly enlightening as regards the internal shifts in justificatory repertoires for the projection of French outside those regions of the world where it is securely the dominant language. It should be noted, finally, that Emmanuel Macron's more recent assertive presidential recasting of French outward-directed language policy falls outside the frame of this article, and will require a separate study in its own right (see Macron 2018, Herbillon and Sylla 2018, annex 3). However, the reports studied here constitute what in Kingdon's classic terms one might call the "policy primeval soup" in which the ideas informing Macron's programme were fermented (Kingdon 2003).

An undertow: linguistic melancholy

The genre of a commission report inclines its authors to a kind of practical optimism, for without this their advocacy will seem unconvincing. However, if we read across the corpus with the kind of evenly floating attention that psychoanalysts are advised to adopt, attending to affective knots rather than the rationalisations that encase them, it is hard to miss the recurrent motifs of linguistic melancholy. This is undoubtedly linked to the persistence of historically structured matrices of expectation. Bloche asks why France is worried about the international presence of its language (most countries are not remotely concerned by this), and observes that "the concern for an international dimension ['le souci de l'international'] is rooted in the French national consciousness" (Bloche 1998, 5). The insistence on an international presence for its culture and language may have functioned since 1944 as a substitute for loss of economic and military power (Legendre and de Rohan 2009, 7), but that substitute is itself now being worn away, with one of the later reports evoking even the "end of an era" ["fin de règne"] (Herbillon and Sylla 2018, 29). The language's advocates may habitually have considered that foreigners would necessarily and naturally be interested in the fate of their "universal" language (Tavernier 2000, ch. 1, para 1). But increasingly, the reports stress that the language's "situational rent" (Rochebloine and Schneider 2007, 5), that is to say the inherited advantages deriving from its colonial and cultural past, is no longer seen by others as warranted, and that its continuing international role will need fresh justificatory frameworks (Rochebloine and Schneider 2007, 5, Kristeva 2009, 30, Juppé and Schweitzer 2008, 45).

Each report uses a cluster of familiar reference points to establish the standing of French across the world's linguistic landscapes:

> At the global level, French is still "the other language". It is, after English, the official language of the greatest number of States in the world (29 States). The French people themselves represent just 1% of the world population, but the 220 million speakers of French are present across more than 70 countries, that is to say one in every three countries. French is the second most studied language in the world. (Loncle and Schmid 2013, 31)

But each of these signs of strength harbours on closer inspection "signs of decline" ["indices de déclin"] (Cour des Comptes 2013, 64). The language's status as an official language is in many cases (in Africa) increasingly "precarious" (Levaux 2018, 38), even in such "showcases" ["vitrines"] or "bastions" as Senegal (Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 18, Cour des Comptes 2013, 65). Its attraction as a taught foreign language giving access to the world is reported as either waning or collapsing from South Korea to South America, from Georgia to Germany or England. Demographic

extrapolations in Africa produce hypotheses of up to 770 million speakers worldwide by 2050 – but this is dependent on fragile educational systems in which mastery of French is seen as very limited and forms of political affiliation as increasingly under pressure (Bockel and Lorgeoux 2013, 296-7). The lexis of "battlefield dispatches" ["communiqués de guerre"] that Jacques Rigaud observed in a former era are still present (Rigaud 1979, II,1,C). But it has become overlaid in this imaginary landscape by metaphors of geological ineluctablity – "our language is constantly losing terrain" (Tavernier 2000, Introduction, Attali 2014, 34), "continual erosion" (Rochebloine and Schneider 2007, 20), "collapse" ["effondrement"] (Attali, 44), "disintegration" ["délitement"] (Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 17), "regression" (Cour des Comptes 2013, 10), "retreat" ["recul"] (Loncle and Schmid 2013, 32). The French language appears, in Amirshahi's metaphor, as a "giant with feet of clay" (17).

The sense of unchecked erosion is reinforced by recurrent assertions that those who might be able to stop it are not motivated to do so. It sometimes gives the reader a curious impression that these reports – which, after all, are produced in one sense at the heart of French political power – are crying in a wilderness. They repeatedly decry French elites across the business, political and intellectual worlds for their "abdication" ["démission"] and scandalously casual attitudes ["désinvolture"] when it comes to defending the national language at home and abroad (Tavernier 2000, ch. 3,I,B, Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 7). Even when external language policy does receive lyrical attention from presidents or foreign ministers, the reports decry the mismatch between such discourse and the reality of allotted resources, which are difficult to identify as such and aggregate across dispersed national budget headings (Levaux 2018, 30). They are keen to promote the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie* and to denounce French governments' apparently tepid commitment to it. But the OIF in its real existence is described as bloated, ill-focused ["flou"], opaque and sprawling (Bloche 1998, 12, Kristeva 2009, 43, Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 8). Moreover, the authors perceive little pressure on political elites from below in this regard. The international status of French and *francophonie* are described as "non-issues" for the wider public (Levaux 2018, 80), and they often contrast unfavourably the salience of language policy issues in mainland France with that in francophone communities situated on more obvious geolinguistic faultlines (Quebec, Belgium, France's overseas territories ["*La France d'outre-mer*"]).[3] This appears on first inspection to sit uneasily with the equally insistent motif across the reports that the French language has a "sacred" character within French culture (Kristeva 2009, 9), but this affective ambivalence has at least psychological coherence. Duvernois quotes Philippe Roger writing in *Critique*:

> The French have a passionate relationship to their language, but it is a tormented passion that turns easily to despondency, and even to disdain for what they suspect may be a fallen queen. (quoted at Duvernois and Lepage 2017, 29)

There are repeated suggestions that the general domestic public do not appear to be "interested" in *Francophonie*, or that they view it with suspicion due to its assumed colonial associations (Bourges 2008, 2-3). Indeed, they suggest that the French population as a whole do not even routinely consider that they belong to it – "francophones are the other" ["le francophone, c'est l'autre"] (Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 10).

The manifest direction of flow for all the reports in the corpus is one of political volontarism. Informed outside observers may question the capacity of States to model linguistic behaviours beyond their territories (Wright 2016, 115-118), but the agents writing these reports are clearly invested in that possibility. At the same time, the theme of linguistic transience provides the corpus with a persistent countervailing undertow – "languages are mortal" (Duvernois and Lepage 2017, 11) and French itself risks becoming for others "a dead language" (Tavernier 2000, ch. 3, II, Bockel and Lorgeoux 2013, 297).

Political volontarism: negating language representations

The reports consistently advocate a scouring work of negation upon established representations of the French language, or what we might call its 'indexical' functions (Blommaert 2010). Indeed, they perform that work:

> We must work on the representations of the French language and show how it constitutes a language for the future, for development and leading-edge research. It must no longer be seen at an international level simply as a conduit for luxury products and gastronomy, or be considered as a literary and over-refined language ["une langue littéraire et précieuse"]. (Bourges 2008, 37)

> Today, in our view, the defence of a "literary" French, an elitist fortress inherited from the century of "belles-lettres", is the foremost attitude that we must challenge […]. (Duvernois 2004, 24)

> We must, as a matter of urgency, break with a backward-looking vision of the French language in the world. We will no longer be able to claim an international status ["rang"] for our language […] by invoking what resembles increasingly an inherited situational rent. (Rochebloine and Schneider 2007, 5)

The lexis of "breaking with" ["rompre avec"] is omnipresent, as are negations in the form "no longer" ["ne … plus"]. The authors want to put aside – or at least downplay and transmute – images of French as a language for the distinction of cultivated elites and the legitimation of a former great power.

They likewise insist throughout the corpus on the need to break with the image of a global "great power" battle between English and French for linguistic supremacy:

> *Francophonie* is not about pitting French against English. We must repeat this message tirelessly. […]. The linguistic stakes do not revolve around an imaginary face-to-face standoff with the English language. (Bloche 1998, 11)

> The promotion of the French language does not amount to a simple face-to-face standoff with English. (Duvernois and Lepage 2017, 19)

This enduring and quasi-ritual insistence does of course make a virtue of necessity – as noted above, English is indeed now the world's uncontested hypercentral language. But as we shall see, this scouring work of negation is designed also to clear a space for articulating a different kind of relational position for French in the world.

The cumulative negation carried out by the reports extends also to the style of French cultural and linguistic projection across the world. The classic trope to describe this action has been "rayonnement", suggesting a radiating centre diffusing its even light across an otherwise benighted world. Yet the term appears almost always within negative constructions, exploited above all as a foil to propose a putatively more reciprocal and less "gallocentric" approach to cultural mediation and the French language itself: "there is not a unilateral *rayonnement* in a global world, but instead reciprocal influences" (Juppé and Schweitzer 2008, 94, Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 65). Likewise, the "universalistic" claims often attached to the French language are not fully abandoned, but are insistently reframed ("The point is, without denying our inheritance, to break with a 'conquering universalism'" (Herbillon and Sylla 2018, 10)).

It might not surprise some that the reports attempt to dismantle a certain inherited superiority complex in French dealings with the wider world. Perhaps more unexpected but just as prominent as a motif across the corpus are attempts to untie something like an emerging inferiority complex, a loss of confidence in the value of the language as a resource for the world. The authors see this emerging in forms of brittle "defensiveness" ["crispation"] among some who would protect the language as it currently stands, or alternatively in forms of "abdication" or "nonchalance" ["désinvolture"] among those who see it as a "lost cause" (Bloche 1998, 13, Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 7). Indeed the language of inhibitory "complexes" becomes manifest halfway through the corpus, and not just in the language of the psychoanalyst and semiotician Julia Kristeva, who advocates "an uninhibited policy ['une politique décomplexée'] for the French language and *francophonie* both inside and outside France" (2009, 88, see also e.g. Attali 2014, 1).

The reports try to build a representation of the French language that would be neither "superior" nor "inferior". The reports' injunctions frequently take the form of further double negations. Tavernier reports Lionel Jospin's assertion that "*francophonie* should be the expression neither of a form of nostalgia nor of a desire for power" (2000, ch. 1, para 1), a neither-nor proposition taken up in largely the same terms two decades later by Duvernois and Lepage: "Our intention was to move beyond the 'nostalgia for a lost paradise' or the 'reincarnation of a bygone imperialism'" (2017, 7). Simple and double negations do not by themselves build up a positive justificatory repertoire. The task, therefore, for these political voluntarists, has been to redefine the global relational space in which French exists today, and to redefine the roles that it might play in that space.

New geolinguistic space

The reports argue that future functions of French have to be understood in terms of a "new international linguistic cartography" (Bourges 2008, 8). This recasting of the relationships between the world's languages is driven in their accounts both by powerful technological dynamics and by geopolitical shifts in the competition for global influence across the period.

The first report of the corpus was expressly tasked with reflecting on the effects of the internet, whose implications were just starting to become generally apparent, on the "international presence" of France and the French language. It was insistent on the reality of the new "space" within which world languages would now coexist:

> These technologies have an impact on France's international presence because they lay out a new space. In the course of our mission, it has struck us how this metaphor, which one might have initially seen as somewhat facile and conventional, has been borne out. A different space really is being created, a digital space in which we move, travel, and communicate [...]. A new diplomacy is thus being born there, other symbolic representations, other kinds of treaty and other kinds of war. (Bloche 1998, 7)

Over twenty years, the corpus would elaborate the properties of this new space in which relations between points could become more "horizontal" (Bloche, 17), where the "vectors" in play become "dematerialised" (Juppé and Schweitzer 2008, 93), where "centres" in former centre-periphery relations become either harder to locate or multiple, and where "peripheries" can become alternative hubs (Herbillon and Sylla 2018, 30-31).

The new emergent space was not driven by purely technological dynamics. Across the twenty years of these reports, the authors note a rise in power ["montée en puissance"] of other national actors (Herbillon and Sylla, 10, 30), producing a much more crowded field in the competition for global influence (Loncle and Schmid 2013, 12). This has happened in France's geopolitical backyard, with EU enlargement bringing the paradoxical combination of more voices but

fewer "real" working languages – indeed a thoroughgoing "anglicisation" (Duvernois 2004, 10).[4] It has happened in France's former colonial preserve ["pré carré"] in Africa, with the pressures for a "normalisation" of relations with France (Baumel and Guibal 2015, 156) producing across many countries a less deferent or automatic recourse to the language itself (Bockel and Lorgeoux 2013, 296). It has happened as other nations with no substantial connection at all to the French language, such as China, India or Brazil, have become major new poles of attraction in the world system and hence the world language system (Duvernois and Lepage 2017, 19-20).

The implications of these new dynamics for the international vitality of French are not seen in a purely negative light by the reports. Indeed Bloche rather sets the tone in this regard. Although worried at the time about anglophone domination of an emerging internet, he considered that, as a platform, it could potentially endow with ontological cohesiveness the otherwise dispersed existence of *francophonie* across the planet:

> Whereas geographical francophone space […] does not constitute a coherent space and ignores many francophone "pockets" whose countries have not joined the official institution of *Francophonie* as well as, more generally, all the French-speakers of non-francophone countries, in digital space, *francophonie* can offer any French-speaker, wherever they are, the same means of communication and information. (Bloche 1998, 15)

Attali argues 15 years later, perhaps optimistically, that "language is the new geography" in its technically amplified capacity to transcend national frontiers, and that this will give existential solidity to an "economic *francophonie*" (Attali 2014, 1, 58). Amirshahi sees the contemporary shifting of the world language system's tectonic plates as placing *francophonie* at a crossroads:

> The global context carries the seeds of a possible renewal for *francophonie* … or of its gradual erasure. The upheavals currently underway are challenging identities anew. The geocultural stakes are becoming structural forces, linguistic domains are taking shape ["des aires linguistiques s'organisent"]. Languages are asserting themselves, consolidating their natural spaces and spreading out beyond them. Chinese, Arabic, Spanish and Portuguese are notable examples, firmly established across the international landscape. In other words, there is a geopolitics of languagues, and therefore a geopolitics of *francophonie*. At a time when the diplomacy of influence is playing a leading role, some countries have recognised the importance of the linguistic dimension ["le vecteur linguistique"] in the assertion of their power ["puissance"], while others have understood the advantage to them of uniting around a language. (2014, 7)

Our authors maintain the prospect of French as a major world language amongst the "peloton" (Duvernois and Lepage 2017, 19-20) of those cited here. But its status appears as comparatively more precarious. This is due to the specifities of its dispersed topography.

The authors refer recurrently to French as being one of only two languages present on five continents (Duvernois 2004, 15, Attali 2014, 1).[5] However, it is mostly concentrated within two continents, notwithstanding the symbolic importance of Quebec (whose language measures are the object of policy envy across the corpus (Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 71-80)) and the archipelago of former territories and *La France d'outre-mer* (represented in reports as revealing "bridgeheads" more attuned to the position of French in the world than is mainland France itself (Duvernois and Lepage 2017, 25)). And in regard to these two continents, we see some interesting shifts across the corpus. In earlier reports, Europe is presented as the domain where the future of French will be played out, whether institutionally in Brussels or more widely across the continent itself (Tavernier 2000, ch. 1,II,B, Duvernois 2004, 15). In later reports, however, as the "anglicisation" of EU operations and indeed wider European lingua franca exchange started to seem irreversible, reports began to cite Africa as the future "centre of gravity" for the francophone world (Amirshahi

and Rochebloine 2014, 17, Baumel and Guibal 2015, 160). These latter propositions are based on a combination of purely demographic projections and the twofold assumption that upcoming generations in francophone African countries would pass increasingly through primary and secondary education for which a medium of instruction would be French. At their most optimistic, the combination of these assumptions produces scenarios which project 770 million French speakers by 2050 (Attali 2014, 53), making French the most rapidly expanding and even the "second" of the planet's world languages (Duvernois and Lepage 2017, 12, Levaux 2018, 6).[6] Nonetheless, the authors are generally attentive to realities on the ground, and they note in turn the extreme fragility of several African education systems (e.g. Mali, Central African Republic), signs of a turn away from French towards English or African languages (e.g. Rwanda, Cameroon, Senegal), or simply the enduringly fraught social image of the language (e.g. Algeria, Morocco) (Amirshahi and Rochebloine, 17-22). Perhaps unsurprisingly, we see a return in the light of Brexit to the language's European base. Authors note pointedly that English is no longer the exclusive official language of any country in the Union (being a co-official language in just Malta and Ireland). It is suggested that the EU and the continent more broadly might now offer an opportunity for a new kind of transnational linguistic settlement:

> On the question of the new linguistic equilibrium within the European Union after Brexit, an understanding with the Germans, Italians and Spanish could lead to useful progress not so much in favour of French alone but rather towards a more balanced plurilingualism. (Duvernois and Lepage 2017, 49, see also Herbillon and Sylla 2018, 60, Levaux 2018, 45)

The difficulty is, of course, that the tipping point of English's establishment as the European lingua franca may already now have been reached. However, the formulation of the proposition, as well as those relating to French as an "African language" (Bockel and Lorgeoux 2013, 461), show that it is difficult to project French internationally as a cause in itself. The overarching cause here is plurilingualism, and its proponents present the language as a facilitator of this (perhaps the "prime" facilitator, in a muted echo of the older "rayonnement" tradition).

The authors note that a necessary condition for French's international attractiveness is the perception of its geolinguistic reach and "depth" (Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 52, Baumel and Guibal 2015, 191). If its hold is perceived to be becoming weaker in Europe or Africa, or both, then, in the space of self-confirming feedback loops that is the world language system (de Swaan 2001), its attractiveness and hold will wane further still. The new geolinguistic space mapped out across the corpus gives it potentially powerful technological vectors through which to spread and new autonomous non-Gallic centres across the world from which to radiate. But these vectors and centres could also host stampedes to other languages. French will not be maintained or transmitted by sheer force or because of its past aura, as it might have been in the erstwhile spaces of colonial empire and/or cultural *rayonnement*. The challenge for the authors is that of articulating what transnational use or good it can represent today.

Utility and *outillage*

The reports argue recurrently for a "desacralisation" of French, a move away from its image as a "language of prestige" (Duvernois 2004, 29, Rochebloine and Schneider 2007, 57). Several authors insist likewise that it should not "only" constitute a "language of culture" (Rochebloine and Schneider 2007, 45, Mancel, Terrasse, and Marsac 2015, 120). Instead, a constant motif is that it should equip and project itself as a "useful" and "functional" language (Rochebloine and Schneider 2007, 58, Duvernois and Lepage 2017). They want to institute an alternative positive "image" for French: "this place of the French language as a tool allows for its restoration at a global level" (Tavernier 2000, conclusion). For Amirshahi, this is crucial to the future of French as a world

language, and he underlines the essentially "pragmatic" relation of States and the "utilitarian" attitudes of individuals to the uptake or dropping of working languages (Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 37-38). The costs of mastering and maintaining a language are high (Ammon 2015, 89-97), and as Wright has noted, vehicular languages are rapidly abandoned outside their core territories once uses for them are no longer readily apparent (2016, 117).

The reports advocate consolidating a number of domains where French already has a significant functional role. Attali in particular underlines the existing importance of an "economic *francophonie*", underlining the language's facilitation of economic integration across North and West Africa. Many other reports pick up on the economic aspect of the language's utility, both in terms of the markets it opens up, and, in the context of various francophone African States, as a "tool of development" (Tavernier 2000, conclusion, Attali 2014, 58). Emphasis is placed not simply on the general importance of maintaining education in French across a range of plurilingual contexts, though this is a dominant theme. Authors repeatedly single out the importance of "functional" forms of language-learning, notably the "French for specific purposes" ["Français sur objectifs spécifiques"] forms of technically and professionally orientated language courses (Duvernois 2004, 28, Attali 2014, 19, Mancel, Terrasse, and Marsac 2015, 121). The status of French as a langauge of regional African economic integration explains the pockets of growing interest in French as a foreign language in some non-francophone African countries like Nigeria or South Africa, or Asian countries like China or Japan (Levaux 2018, 22).

French is presented as a tool of access to "modernity" (Bourges 2008, 37, Duvernois and Lepage 2017, 55), and in particular to modern knowledge (Tavernier 2000, ch. 1,II,B). Authors underline that it is "equipped" to deal with advanced scientific and technical domains thanks to an epistemic capital that not all languages possess:

> Not all languages are equally "equipped" to take on the range of expert domains serving scientific, economic and technical development. French is one of the handful of universal languages to have extended their reach across all these domains. (Levaux 2018, 64)

Authors nonetheless worry that the language's status as a tool of access to modern knowledge is being undermined on its own doorstep by the recourse to the "continuum" of English as a scientific medium within French higher education and research (Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 120-121). They underline the ongoing challenge of maintaining the language's "toolkit" ["outillage"], the "equipment" it can put at its users' disposal. As Attali notes, the digital revolution in natural language processing has opened further fronts in this respect:

> Language technologies thus constitute […] a substantial economic stake: the more a language can be easily accessed, translated and manipulated through these technologies, the more readily it will be used on digital networks. It is vital to provide the French language with the requisite technical tools ["outiller technologiquement la langue française"] so that it can continue to be a language of international communication, a working language, a language for communicating with machines. (2014, 57)

Pascale Casanova (2015) has observed more generally how languages can appropriate but also lose the specific forms of intellectual and technical "capital" that make them compelling tools.

The authors' insistence that French must not be "only" a language of "culture" does not amount to a straightforward negation of that role. On the contrary, they underline repeatedly that a thinly instrumental approach to the language will leave it exposed. The "attractiveness" of a language cannot be "decreed" (Rochebloine and Schneider 2007, 57), and is highly dependent on the symbolic wares it can offer to would-be speakers: "we must promote a language of contents" (Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 144). These "contents" on which succeeding reports insist so much correspond to what Rigaud in a much earlier report defined as the basic "resource" of French

external cultural policy – the artistic and cultural offerings produced in the language (1979, pt. 2,III,4). But, more so than Rigaud, these reports insist on the requirement, if it is to be a factor in world-language-maintenance, for such content affectively to resonate not simply among cultivated elites but across whole populations – "*francophonie* will live among the popular classes or it will not live at all" ["la francophonie sera populaire ou ne sera pas"] (Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 137). They discuss how to shift French film from its niche or even apparently *démodé* ["ringard"] reputation to something more widely appealing via the institution of a "Netflix francophone" or other kinds of platform integration (Attali 2014, 65, Herbillon and Sylla 2018, 70, 105). They summon the firepower ["force de frappe"] of France's external media apparatus (RFI and France 24), as well as that of *Francophonie* (TV5 Monde), as means for producing "a 'cultural immersion' (in the broad sense)" that can "root French in everyday life" (Mancel, Terrasse, and Marsac 2015, 106, Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 30). RFI probably already fulfils this role in some African cities, though it would be difficult to describe the work of France 24 and TV5 Monde in these terms. Finally, they advocate a conception of French-language literary and musical production that takes it beyond its enduring hexagonal straitjacket to give it the attractiveness of a kaleiodoscopic world culture (Amirshahi and Rochebloine, 65-68, Kristeva 2009, 28).

The various "equipment" and "contents" provision advocated by the authors resemble the competing "capital enhancement" programmes undertaken at much earlier stages in their historical development by English, French, German and Italian as described by Casanova (2015). For the corpus as a whole demonstrates, in effect, that it is only as a "high-capital" supercentral language that French can justify its intrinsic claims on others' attention and time. Maintaining this value will require, for the authors, concomitant forms of both centering and decentering for the French language. Forms of centering: they argue recurrently that France needs a dedicated ministry or secretary of State for its language (*passim* across the corpus); and they start to argue that the OIF should address its problems of institutional bloat and drift by concentrating on a "hard core" of members which are authentically "francophone" and by focusing on issues relating directly to the strength and reach of the language (Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 13). And forms of decentering: France should not place itself at the centre of *francophonie* (Juppé and Schweitzer 2008, 98), or adopt a proprietorial attitude to its language:

> There exist today a plurality of "Frenches", with none having *a priori* more legitimacy than another, and all must be equally respected and contribute to *francophonie*. (Duvernois 2017)

This may seem a truism to many readers, but the notion's very repetition across the corpus is important. The language's value as a world resource will depend on the self-reinforcing "network externalities" through which more speakers generate more speakers (and fewer speakers fewer speakers).[7] These will depend in turn on a polycentric diffusion, and France cannot maintain this dynamic by itself.

Metalinguistic advocacy and global public goods

De Swaan (2001, ch. 2) argues that languages constitute "hypercollective goods", most notably because they are non-divisible and non-excludable, and because their value for each user augments with every supplementary user recruited (through the network externalities just evoked). However, those working within the loose advocacy coalition studied here know that the widespread projection of French cannot be justified for its own sake (why privilege this hypercollective good over another?). They hence try, in the first set of moves analysed above, to frame French itself with its specific attributes and reach as a kind of *sui generis* global public good.[8] Even so, there is clearly a sense across the corpus that this primary "global public good framing" is itself not sufficiently potent as a justification of French for the world. They therefore take recourse to a second level of global

public good framing, arguing that French as a transnational medium is singularly well positioned to facilitate the "global public good" that is linguistic and cultural diversity in its own right (Legendre and de Rohan 2009, 60) – and which they counterpose regularly to the "homogenisation" left in its wake by the "steamroller" of the English language (Duvernois and Lepage 2017, 11).

They do this firstly by identifying the defence of the French language abroad with the defence of linguistic plurality as such: "The defence of French and the development of plurilingualism are two sides of the same battle" (Duvernois 2004, 21). At an initial level, the case is that French as an alternative lingua franca promotes plurality by the simple fact of resisting the steamroller of a single hypercentral language. Increasingly, however, the reports gesture towards alliances of mutual recognition with the constellations of other supercentral languages – notably the hispanophone, lusophone and arabophone worlds – in order to promote as such frameworks for a plural world lingua franca regime (Bloche 1998, 164, Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 97, Levaux 2018, 19). Indeed, the case for promoting French even across the areas of *francophonie* where it works as a second language becomes its alleged propensity for organising and facilitating relations among other national and subnational languages (Amirshahi and Rochebloine, 23-24, Mancel, Terrasse, and Marsac 2015, 134).

The reports manifest an awareness that this shift to justifying French in terms of a "diversity as public good" paradigm places France in an awkward position as regards the practice of "linguistic reciprocity" within the country itself (as if domestic practices have not caught up with the principles that geolinguistic necessity has forced it to espouse abroad) (Amirshahi and Rochebloine, 39). They note increasingly that if France expects other countries to engage with its language, it must afford more space in its official foreign languages education provision for them, "from Chinese to Arabic, and including Portuguese, Spanish, Persian, Japanese and Russian" (61). The national and regional languages of the world's "francophone" zones themselves need to be better integrated into the country's educational curricula and cultural landscape (Kristeva 2009, 39-40). A linguistic reciprocity programme would extend to the upskilling of diplomats in post (Juppé and Schweitzer 2008, 97) and the foreign language broadcasting of RFI and France 24 (Kristeva, 52, Levaux, 67), but the reports repeatedly insist that it must begin at home.

As the reports often underline, this espousal of global linguistic plurality meshes with France's self-ascribed role since the 1980s as champion of the "cultural exception", the capacity for all States to defend their cultural and linguistic autonomy. This role of "first among mediators" undoubtedly carries over something of the impulse to "rayonnement" that has historically characterised the French approach to cultural and linguistic projection. However, it also introduces important differences, and the framework is justified across the corpus, at least implicitly, by the requirements of mutual recognition in international relations, which challenge more traditional unilateral approaches to a "diplomacy of influence".[9] It is also justified by a belief on the part of the writers themselves in the intrinsic virtues of a "polyphonic" multilingualism as a richer "laboratory" or "crucible" for human thought than the continuum of monolinguistic expression (Kristeva 2009, 11-12, 34). This is a recurrent motif, but is harder to demonstrate within the genre of a policy report, and is doubtless the point at which such reports must hand over the burden of justification to properly literary, philosophical or linguistic explorations.

Concluding Remarks

There is much thick policy detail in these reports written between 1998 and 2018 and comprising my primary corpus which this article has had to leave to one side. They have nonetheless allowed me to draw out the principal tropes and rationales through which these and other advocates seek to justify claims for the enduring role of French as a world language – as a 'supercentral' language (a transnational lingua franca) rather than simply a 'central' (national) language, to use the terms of de Swaan. These claims revolve around the contention that the French language is no longer simply

what it was, and that it is good for other things. The authors look to move beyond the melancholy constatation of the language's international retreat (a *capitis diminutio*) and the declining potency of its image. Indeed they seek to accelerate in many respects the break-up of that erstwhile image (with its connotations of cultural refinement, diplomatic elegance, and luxury), or at least to recast it in terms of a broader spectrum. Much emphasis is placed on augmenting the economic utility of the language (it must have practical value if people are going to trouble themselves with learning it) as well as its cultural resonance (the symbolic wares it carries must reach beyond social elites if it is to have more than niche status). The authors assume that France by itself cannot secure its language's global future, and make the case for a pluralised and polycentric conception of 'Frenches'. However, it is as if even this expansion does not provide a sufficiently strong basis by itself to justify agents' investment in the future of French(es) given current dynamics across the world language system. The defence of French as a global public good in its own right is integrated into a wider defence of cultural and linguistic diversity as such, as a second-order global public good that will be threatened should a single hypercentral language attain sway as the world's single lingua franca. France and French are repeatedly framed as potential prime mediators of diversity in this regard, with recurrent reference to their earlier pioneering role in the development of the 'cultural exception' as a regulatory instrument. The details of such mediation-to-come are often, however, rather undeveloped or promissory, due perhaps to a relative lack of knowledge on the part of the authors. It would be interesting to see the results of further research into the justicatory repertoires for the promotion or maintenance of the world's other supercentral languages (Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Swahili, Chinese, Malay, Russian, Hindi, German…). Indeed, given that such languages are often in a position of objective competition not just with hypercentral English but also with each other, it would also be interesting to see further research into the justificatory repertoires for their mutual collaboration, which is surely less straightforward than its well-meaning invocation might suggest.

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ENDNOTES

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[1] On the heuristic value of justifications as an object of study, see Boltanski and Thévenot (1991). For detailed presentations of France's institutional apparatus for the promotion of its language abroad, see Lane (2013 or 2016, ch. 3 and 6) or *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France* (2017, 125-194). I would like to thank the anonymous readers for their helpful feedback on a first version of this article.

[2] For example, one might imagine a group of eight people gathered for a business meeting, of whom seven were highly competent in language B, but the last spoke only language A. If the other seven had at least working competence in language A, it is highly likely that that A would be spontaneously elected as the vehicle of interaction (and even more likely if there were one or two further colleagues joining the meeting with poor or no knowledge of language B but working competence in language A). For an extended discussion of the 'maxi-min' principle in group language choice, see van Parijs (2011, 13-21).

[3] In this article, following common convention, I use *Francophonie* with a capital letter to designate the institution of the OIF and *francophonie* with a small letter to designate the sociolinguistic reality of French speakers across the world (the latter appellation would thus include Algerian speakers of French, which the former would not).

[4] On the paradox of "more languages, more English", see de Swaan (2001, ch. 8), van Parijs (2011, ch. 4).

[5] This dispersion (measured technically as entropy) boosts the position of French in the ranking tables of world languages produced by Calvet and Calvet (2013).

[6] Duvernois bases this perhaps heady estimate on a "weighted" ranking inspired indirectly (via the OIF) by Calvet's nuanced and customisable approach to assessing the "weight" of languages (beyond raw aggregates of first and second speakers) (Calvet and Calvet 2013); Levaux's projection follows the demographic extrapolations of Attali.

[7] "Network externalities" is a term commonly used in economics to describe scenarios where the value of a good for a user rises or falls when the number of users investing in compatible goods rises or falls (typical examples are computer operating systems or social networking platforms, but it applies very well to the broadly conceived 'economy' of language selection).

[8] On global public goods, see Barrett (2007).

[9] On the concept of recognition within international relations, see Daase et al. (2015).