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# Emmanuel Macron and the reprojection of the French language

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## ABSTRACT

Although preceding presidents of the Fifth Republic have shown commitment in varying degrees to the projection of the French language, none has done so in as focused and symbolically charged a manner as Emmanuel Macron. This can be explained through the combination of his individual biographical trajectory, the opportunity offered to carve out a presidential profile in relation to his predecessors and his rivals, and through the contemporary position of French in the world language system. The uncertain position of French in this system means that Macron could not simply perpetuate older rhetorical and policy practices for projecting the language. Instead he sought to recast French as an imaginary object through recourse to an alternative cluster of metaphors and a reframed symbolic space, and the appropriation of motifs developed by postcolonial and other critical thinkers. He also aggregated a platform of policy measures acting as ‘seeds’ designed to demonstrate the uses and desirability of the language under the rubrics of education, communication and creation. Macron’s reprojection of French is ‘versatile’ and ambiguous insofar as it allows him symbolically to defuse political and cultural tensions. This is demonstrated in his project for a *Cité internationale de la langue française* in Villers-Cotterêts.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les présidents de la Cinquième République se sont tous investis dans la projection de la langue française, mais aucun ne lui a donné un poids symbolique aussi lourd qu’Emmanuel Macron. Ceci s’explique par la combinaison de trois éléments: une trajectoire biographique, l’opportunité de se démarquer de ses prédécesseurs et de ses rivaux, et la position actuelle du français dans le système linguistique du monde. La position incertaine de la langue dans ce système rend peu porteurs d’anciens modes de la projeter. Macron a cherché à refondre le français en tant qu’objet imaginaire en recourant à un répertoire alternatif d’expressions métaphoriques et à un espace symbolique recadré, ainsi qu’en appropriant certains penseurs critiques et post-coloniaux. Il a agencé un programme de mesures de soutien à la langue couvrant les domaines de l’éducation, de la communication et de la création. Ces mesures fonctionnent comme des ‘sèmes’ de politique publique pour promouvoir les usages et la désirabilité de la langue.

## KEYWORDS

Emmanuel Macron; French language; language policy; world language; world language system; francophonie

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Cette projection de la langue est ambiguë dans la mesure où elle permet à Macron de neutraliser certaines tensions politiques et culturelles. On peut voir ce processus à l'œuvre dans son projet pour une Cité internationale de la langue française à Villers-Cotterêts.

The projection of the French language has been a more central and symbolically charged focus of attention for Emmanuel Macron than for any preceding president of the Fifth Republic. If we can legitimately speak of presidential-level cultural policies, then the leitmotif and overarching framework of Macron's cultural policy has been supplied by the French language—from his landmark speeches in Ouagadougou, the Institut de France and Erevan in 2017 and 2018 to the planned full opening of his *grand projet*, the *Cité internationale de la langue française*, at Villers-Cotterêts in 2023. But 'French' as a cultural object has not been the same for Macron as for previous presidents. What has distinguished this symbolic representation as elaborated by Macron? And why was he drawn to it? What profit did a reworked projection of the French language from 2017 appear to offer, and what problems and ambiguities did it present? After setting out the historical and contemporary political contexts for his investment in the French language, I will answer these questions through an exploration of some 15 speeches and interviews by Macron, along with other written materials and official presidential press releases, devoted in full or in substantial part to the projection of the French language (see the 'primary corpus' section in the references at the end of this article). I will subject these to a thematic analysis laid out in successive sections on the geopolitical reframing of French, his deployment of a novel set of metaphors for the presidential projection of the language, the repurposing of French within a 'global public good' narrative, and the framing of the Villers-Cotterêts *grand projet*.<sup>1</sup>

## Presidential projections of the French language

French presidents have often invested themselves in the promotion of French outside France, though with significant differences in intensity and approach. De Gaulle was an energetic defender of a world profile for the language, though understood as an attribute of the French nation itself and contributor to its 'grandeur'. Once his initial hopes for a francophone bloc in Africa structured organically around the leadership of France were frustrated by the early 1960s, he was a very tepid supporter of the more multilateral proposals for francophone association proposed by a clutch of African leaders (Deniau 2001, 45–55), and came round to these only insofar as they were a necessary concession for the pursuit of his overall policy ambitions for France's role in francophone Africa and for Quebec.<sup>2</sup> Pompidou was if anything more invested in the promotion of the French language itself, arguing already as de Gaulle's prime minister that:

De tous les pays, la France est celui qui tient le plus profondément à l'exportation de sa langue et de sa culture. Ce trait nous est véritablement spécifique. [...] Notre coopération est indiscutablement orientée [...] vers cet effort d'expansion de notre langue et de notre culture. (Pompidou 1964)

Towards the end of his own presidency Pompidou began to move this 'expansionist' agenda into a more multilateral direction for the francophone world, but this was scuppered by his technocratic successor Giscard d'Estaing, who saw little potential for alliances around the French language in his plans to reposition France as an international economic and political force. Turpin (2018) attributes substantial explanatory power to the individual dispositions of succeeding presidents in the vigour or otherwise of France's outward-directed policies around its language. Thus the reputedly 'literary' Mitterrand repositioned language as a central component of France's international presence, though decisively inflecting at least the rhetoric of francophonie in a more 'anti-hegemonic' direction. He took France's francophone commitment beyond the 'cultural' and 'technical' enclaves to which previous leaders had confined it, and started to project it as an explicitly 'political' project, instituting from 1986 the two-yearly head-of-State summits gathering in a single forum the leaders of the francophone world. Jacques Chirac had inherited his political mentor Pompidou's commitment to the French language, and combined this, in a distinctive extension of the 1990s 'cultural exception' agenda, with an endeavour to position France as defender of the world's minority cultures and languages. He thus built decisively on Mitterrand's political legacy to drive, albeit by somewhat tortuous bureaucratic pathways, the construction from 1997 of a permanent multilateral high-level political organization overseen, in theory, by an authoritative political leader (the *Agence intergouvernementale de la Francophonie*, rebaptized in 2005 the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*). This action leads Turpin to credit Chirac with the consolidation of Francophonie as a fully fledged 'policy in its own right, going beyond even the question of Franco-African relations, and within the framework of an increasing multilateralisation of French foreign policy' (Turpin 2022, 102).

Yet despite the salience of what appeared under Mitterrand and Chirac to have become part of the presidential 'reserved domain', the resilience of francophonie as a sociolinguistic reality across the world was becoming less evident to observers. The theme of its 'retreat' (*recul*) was already well established in the 1960s among high-level members of de Gaulle's government such as Maurice Couve de Murville, Georges Pompidou and Michel Debré (Turpin 2018, 16, 33). In the two decades preceding 2017, the metaphorical lexis of geological erosion, retreat and friability was an almost involuntary leitmotif across parliamentary and Senate reports otherwise voluntarily committed to championing the language's promotion (Ahearne 2022). Many of these reports identified a reluctance among French elites themselves to espouse the promotion or even use of the language abroad, seen, depending on political positioning, as representing a lost cause, yesterday's battle, a postcolonial toxin or a kneejerk anti-americanism. For many, the very expansion of the OIF pursued under Mitterrand and Chirac, opening it to many countries who were scarcely 'francophone' at all, had turned it into a bloated and overreaching bureaucracy. It had also become clear that the strained commitment to preserving francophone 'spheres of influence' had led to some disastrous foreign policy judgements, notably in Rwanda (Commission de recherche sur les archives françaises relatives au Rwanda et au génocide des Tutsi 2021). It was not surprising, even putting aside questions of individual disposition, that neither Nicolas Sarkozy nor François Hollande appeared to show much proactive commitment to the French language abroad beyond the 'conformism of speeches prepared by their advisors' (Turpin 2018, 209).

Why then did Macron resurrect the theme of the French language at home, but particularly abroad, and turn it into the dominant theme of his presidential-level cultural policy? And how did his rhetorical and policy treatment of the theme differ not just from his immediate linguistico-sceptical predecessors (Hollande and Sarkozy) but also from the forceful commitment of his more distant predecessors initially to the French language and its role abroad (de Gaulle, Pompidou) and then also to the wider embrace of multi-lateral international Francophonie (Mitterrand, Chirac)?

## The French language and Macron's presidential disposition

An initial response to the 'why' question above can be found in the fortuitous conjunction of an individual presidential trajectory and disposition (a linguistic *habitus*), opportunities in relation to political rivals, and the dynamic of the world language system and its relation to France's position in the world.

Damon Mayaffre, in his remarkable multiple-correspondence and AI-based analysis of Macron's speeches between 2017 and 2021, contends that Macron is as a whole the most linguistically versatile and virtuoso all-round performer of all the Fifth Republic's presidents (though de Gaulle and especially Pompidou might trump him under specific measures, notably when it comes to their specifically 'literary' or oratory prowess) (Mayaffre 2021, pp. 110–112, 229).<sup>3</sup> Of course, Macron benefits like other presidents from a communications staff including speechwriters or auxiliary 'plumes' (Lévrier 2021, pp. 291–374). However, it is precisely this instituted speaking subject 'Emmanuel Macron', actively orchestrated and carefully stylized by the individually fluent Macron, with which we are concerned here. Mayaffre bases his contention on Macron's wide discursive range across multiple registers (high and low, and from erudite philosophical reference to technico-administrative jargon); the spontaneous mastery of complex syntactical construction; the lexical variety (measured as a conventional proxy through the number of hapaxes or single-occurrence items in the corpus); the confident venturing beyond French into the world's lingua franca, either in terms of discursive fragments or for whole speeches (Macron 2018b), even if this sat awkwardly with the projection of French itself. There are well-known biographical reasons behind Macron's capacities in this regard. His first attempts to enter France's elite echelons were via literary pathways to the *École normale supérieure*. It was only after failing this after two attempts and studying philosophy, notably as Paul Ricoeur's assistant, that he began his alternative route through the *École nationale d'administration*, the *Inspection générale des finances*, Rothschild Bank and thence into government.<sup>4</sup> He had initially aspired to be a novelist, and married his high-school theatre and literature teacher. Even after joining Rothschilds, he continued to collaborate with the high-profile review *Esprit*, and after leaving his first post within government as deputy secretary-general at the *Élysée* for François Hollande, he reportedly worked on creating a 'start-up' company specializing in digital approaches to foreign language learning (Couturier 2017, ch.5). When he came to the presidency, Macron therefore had both a significant psychological investment in the French language as well as a competitive edge in discursive performance compared to rivals in the political field, and he was thus predisposed to mobilize these for political advantage.

As a symbolic object with a now rather uncertain existential status at least in global terms, the French language paradoxically suited Macron's overall political project. From Rivarol's championing in 1783 of the language's intrinsic 'universality' to de Gaulle's politics of symbolic 'grandeur' in the 1960s, French as a world language had traditionally underpinned France's claims to world significance (Cerny 1980; Rivarol 2014). But analysts and politicians within France increasingly suspected that the language was a 'fallen queen' (Duvernois and Lepage 2017, 30; Roger 2016, 291), as its use in global forums and notionally 'francophone' territories gave way to English or local languages. Analysts outside France have used the language as an object study in how 'stampedes' from one language to another operate (de Swaan 2001; Van Parijs 2011) or as the very example of the inefficacy of voluntaristic language policies aiming to reverse bottom-up linguistic dynamics beyond a nation's core territories (Wright 2016). However, this variant of French *déclinisme* offered Macron an ideal contrastive foil against which to project his re-energized new casting of the language. It constituted a major plank of his explicitly 'projective', globally ambitious overall foreign policy for France, contrasting with the more defensive positions of national *repli* and protectionism or complacent neglect which he attributed to political competitors (Macron 2016a, 2016b).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as we shall see with his presentation of his *grand projet* for Villers-Cotterêts, the thematics of language as at once a privileged national icon and a medium of international communication allow Macron to appeal both to constituencies rooted in national 'territoires' and to those more connected to transnational flows. In other words, it offered the potential to reach across the fractures between the 'hubs' and the 'peripheries' of globalization which Macron, along with other analysts, saw as a key feature of contemporary French society.

The theme of the French language also constituted a gap in the palette of possible core presidential attributes. While most previous presidents had invested the domain of the national language, none had made its transnational projection so clearly the central axis of their high-level cultural policies. None had instituted it as their principal architectural *grand projet*. In the increasingly personality-driven politics of the French presidential regime (Kuhn 2011, pp. 121–142), Macron's performance-heavy emphasis on the projection of the French language offered him the chance to distinguish his profile from presidents before him and *présidentiabiles* around him. However, such projection was not a straightforward task. The French language was in many ways a politically compromised symbolic object, and it would not suffice simply to perpetuate old modes of projection. One of the unexpected results of Mayaffre's digital analyses of Macron's speeches is to reveal that he uses verbal and nominal compounds formed with 're-' massively more than any preceding president. This may seem merely a stylistic tic, but actually corresponds more substantively to a political programme which looks, discursively at any rate, to combine commitment to features of the status quo (the market, Europe, sovereignty, national identity, etc.) with apparently equal commitment to their reframing, revolutionizing, re-energizing, revivification, etc. (Mayaffre 2021, pp. 221–223). We can extend this perspective to his treatment of the French language. He looks to combine an object of long-standing visceral attachment for many of the French population (the national language whose institution is associated with Villers-Cotterêts) with a process of reframing, redefinition and repurposing designed to turn it into the focus of a new physical but also metaphorical 'cité internationale'. This process of discursive re-laboration turns 'French' into a different kind of imagined object.

## The geopolitical reframing of French

The starting point of the reframing performed by Macron is that French is no longer simply French. The novelty here lies not in the constataction but in the mode of its high-level presidential performance. Previous presidents had insisted on the status of French as an international language, but Macron does more than any president before him discursively to unshackle the world's 'Frenches' from a single normative centre in France. French represents, Macron asserts, 'une nation plus large que la France' and indeed a virtual 'continent' (Macron 2017d). It has 'emancipated' itself from France (Macron 2018a) and its future no longer 'belongs' to that nation (2017 f). Macron invokes the now stock (optimistic) projection that French as a world language ('langue monde') will have 700 million speakers by 2050, and uses this to promote 'une politique offensive et décomplexée du français et du plurilinguisme' (Macron 2018c).<sup>6</sup> Of course, the very fact that Macron must take such care to decouple French from France, and concomitantly to couple it systematically with references to plurilingualism, underlines that its international projection cannot be as 'uninhibited' as he suggests—indeed we even see him at Ougadougou 'pre-correcting' himself before a prereflexive instinct to re-attribute the language to France ('... la langue, j'allais dire la langue française ...' (2017 f)).

The reframed space which Macron aspires to map out is distinguished as from a set of foils from previous 'spaces'—from the 'Cartesian' or 'rectilinear' geometries of classical French and its radial diffusion ('rayonnement') (2018a) as well as the 'tired' two-dimensional space of institutional Francophonie (2018e) in which other Frenches revolve notionally around a Parisian centre. Instead Macron invokes a 'sphere' whose 'epicentre' is to be found in Africa—somewhere, he says, around the Congo Basin (2018e, 2021a). Across the expanse of this re-imagined space, it becomes easier for Macron to project a vision of French as 'la première langue de l'Afrique et peut-être du monde' (2017 f). Yet Macron's very insistence, his vocabulary, and the battery of euphemized imperatives with which these are accompanied in his speech at Ouagadougou, underline the extent to which the promotion of the language remains entangled in perceptions of specifically French interests:

Je veux une francophonie forte, rayonnante, qui illumine, qui conquiert parce que ce sera la vôtre, portez-la avec fierté cette francophonie, défendez-la, mettez-y vos mots, mettez-y vos expressions, transformez-la, changez-la à votre tour! (2017f)

He would lament after this speech that the 'misunderstandings' which it provoked arose as soon as he started to talk about the French language, and that his young audience believed that he was defending French 'against' their own languages (2018a). Macron's rhetorical coupling of the projection of French with the defence of plurilingualism notwithstanding, these students' perceptions were not based simply on a misunderstanding. At the very least, they indicated that the foundations of French as a world language in Africa, home to so many other language spheres, are not as solid as some statistical indicators would suggest. Indeed, despite efforts of Macron to 'pacify' and/or 'normalise' relations with various African States both francophone and anglophone (Algeria, Rwanda, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria ...), the persistence of 'anti-French



sentiment' as well as other foreign presences on the continent, together with deteriorating military relations, have made it difficult for him to build on the optimistic projections delivered in his Ouagadougou speech (Chafer 2021; Glaser and Airault 2021).

Macron looks also to reframe European space, in which French has for several decades been in retreat both as an EU working language and as a lingua franca or taught language across societies (Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 81–88). As a linguistic patchwork, Macron projects Europe as the very symbol of linguistic diversity and a bulwark against anglophone uniformity:

Notre fragmentation n'est que superficielle. Elle est en fait notre meilleure chance. Et au lieu de déplorer le foisonnement de nos langues, nous devons en faire un atout! (Macron 2017c)

Il n'y a pas d'espace au monde, si vous vous figurez bien les choses, où il y ait autant de langues, autant de cultures, autant de petites séparations que le cœur de notre Europe. (2017d)

At the same time, the departure of the UK from the EU makes it irresistible for Macron to suggest that French might become again the prime mediator among the plurality of these languages, now that no European country is home to English as sole official language. Outside observers may argue that the tipping point has long been reached by which English has established itself as the EU's dominant working language and Europe's lingua franca (Van Parijs 2011). Macron, however, proclaims that it is simply a matter of political will to breathe new life into Victor Hugo's erstwhile conception of French as the language of Europe (Macron 2018a), and suggests as a first step that English should be displaced as the EU's unquestioned working language (Macron 2019). French parliamentarians have since sought to take further moves to promote French as a (or even the) principal working language of the EU (Aubert 2021; Bono-Vandorme 2021). As with Africa, the pattern is to promote spaces of linguistic plurality to counter the 'steamrolling' effects of English, but to position French within those spaces as (in ways not always made fully explicit) a more diversity-enhancing 'puissance médiatrice' (cf. Macron 2018c).

In the global space wherein the dimensions of a language are delimited, Macron gives particular attention to the 'espaces de référence de la vie internationale où se forge le statut de langue mondiale' (2018e)—the United Nations, UNESCO, and other international forums including those of transnational commerce. His commitment to plurilingualism within these spaces meshed with his self-ascribed foreign policy role, especially during Trump's presidency, as global champion of multilateralism (2017a, 2018d). Macron himself made a point of speaking at events within such international forums in English, on the grounds that this would model a linguistically less besieged approach to the world and thus 'attract' people to French itself (2018a). As Lebsanft (2019) notes, this represents a rather disingenuous view of how language dynamics really work. As with his attempts to re-energize the the administratively sprawling *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*, however, Macron is aware of the limited effects of overly 'institutional' defences of the language (we find little reference in his speeches to previous 'vademecum' manuals prescribing the use of French by functionaries abroad). In this we can see also a marked contrast in relation to the more institutionally focused approaches of previous presidents such as Mitterrand and Chirac. Instead, Macron seeks to turn 'French'



into an object of desire not simply by consolidating its potential across Africa, Europe, and the spaces of multilateral intergovernmentality, but also by setting it differently across the imaginary and appetitive poles of attraction of the world language system.

### The metaphorical re-imagining of French

Macron seeks to re-energize representations of the French language by foregrounding performative elements in his own speeches (for example through lexical range and use of metaphor) and by remapping expansive virtual 'spaces' for its projection. He thereby seeks to recreate it as a rather different kind of imaginary object to those previously carried by presidential discourses. This aspect of Macron's language policy rhetoric is also novel for a president, and may indeed initially have somewhat disorientated uninitiated listeners or readers. This is partly because it breaks with more usual representations of the language and injects quite a dense metaphorical load into his speeches, and also because he rather assumes among his audience at least some familiarity with certain demanding literary and philosophical works (such as those by Édouard Glissant or Barbara Cassin).

Previous representations of the language had insisted on the solidity of its existence as both a 'socle' and a 'ciment' for a geographically dispersed francophone 'community' that is subject otherwise to entropy and division, and Macron certainly mobilizes such figures in his turn (2017 f). However, what is distinctive about his discursive treatment in this regard is his constant recourse to metaphorical figures intended to evoke notions of abrasive, unruly and forceful materiality. These figures take on their particular salience through their contrast with a more traditional metaphorical cluster often associated with the French language and which pointed 'indexically' to norms of rectilinear order, geometric radial diffusion, and Cartesian univocality.<sup>7</sup> Macron insists instead on the language's disordered, chaotic, but thereby creative 'energy' (2018a).

In a tactile register, this gives rise to images of abrasion, jagged edges, and of the language pushing and jarring in constant interaction with other 'physically' insistent languages ('se frotter aux autres langues', 'bris de verre dans la bouche' (2017d), 'cette langue [...] bousculée' (2018a, 2021a)). Beyond the standard metaphor of the 'crucible' (2018a), the language is deliberately presented as materially 'impure', a labile amalgam of elements of different provenance ('une langue "rapaillée"' (Macron 2018a), 'une langue qui s'est mâtinée de tous les continents' (2017e, 2021b)). In sonic terms, the emphasis is very seldom on the classic motifs of harmony and clarity, but rather on disorientating noise and clamour ('le monde bruisse de la langue française de façon presque vertigineuse, il résonne aussi de toutes les autres langues'; 'la rumeur du monde parle notre langue' (2018a)). Against the 'tired' geometric spaces attributed to classical *Francophonie* (Macron 2018e), the implicit message of these metaphors is on the unregimented creative energies of the language and its capacities for releasing unpredictable or 'chaotic' interaction. In visual terms likewise, the classic monocentric figure of radial 'rayonnement' is not exactly banished, as if Macron is committed to preserving the term's older associations with forms of 'enlightenment'. This classic metaphor for the language's action is, however, recast in more polycentric and pluralized forms ('ce plurilinguisme rayonnant sur tous les continents' (2018a); 'je veux une francophonie forte, rayonnante, qui illumine' (2017 f)). This radial model of illumination is also overlaid by a series of figures suggesting

again a less linear or more alluringly 'chaotic' play of luminosity (the body of francophone speakers across the world is presented as 'une famille si bigarrée, si chatoyante, si vibrante, diverse, coruscante ...' (2018e)).

Macron's overarching discursive ambition is to project the image of French as a language that is not fixed and frozen in an immutable classical essence now overtaken by the movement of history. Instead, he seeks to present it for the world as a dynamically 'working' language (a 'laboratory') and a transnationally developed resource whose 'variété étourdissante' (2018a) is an active contributor to that very history. There have been, of course, powerful movements across artistic and intellectual fields in recent decades developing precisely such re-imagined representations of the French language. What is distinctive about Macron's speeches is not the formulation of such representations in themselves, but his self-conscious appropriation of these postcolonial or otherwise 'critical' intellectual traditions and their opportunistic redeployment within high-level presidential discourse. Thus Glissant's notions of a 'langue monde' and a 'langue archipel' are taken up recurrently; one is also reminded, in Macron's insistent coupling of francophonie and plurilingualism, of Glissant's mantra that 'je parle et surtout j'écris en présence de toutes les langues du monde' (Glissant 1996, 39–40).<sup>8</sup> Alain Mabanckou is praised for the 'énergie particulière' he infuses into the language by seeing it in the context of 'un ensemble plus étendu, plus éclaté, plus bruyant, c'est-à-dire le monde' (cited in Macron 2018a). Macron invokes the category of 'intraduisibles' (2017c) as associated with Barbara Cassin to foreground all that is lost when linguistic exchange is flattened into a monolingual continuum (Cassin 2019). Certainly, Macron's endeavours to enrol such intellectuals directly into his programme met significant limits, with figures such as Mabanckou or Mbembe expressing reservations about the ambiguities of Macron's ambitions for (reframed) francophone 'expansion' (Mabanckou 2020, pp. 195–197; Mbembe and Mabanckou 2018). Nonetheless, as a discursive symptom, it is revealing that Macron seldom turns for energizing references in his speeches to the proper names associated with the language's classical pre-eminence (Descartes, Rivarol et al.). Instead, he enrolls more recent critical and generally postcolonial figures who have raised to prominence more abrasive, motley, conflicted and kaleidoscopic representations of francophone linguistic space.

The ambiguities inducing Mabanckou to keep his distance from Macron's linguistic ambitions can be seen in other lexical motifs deployed by Macron. We have noted how Macron preserves the classical term 'rayonnement' and makes this acceptable for his audiences abroad by pluralizing the imagined centres and agents of such radial diffusion. In psychoanalytic terms, one might say that adapting in this way the manifest 'rationalisation' for his programme allows something of the original colonial impulse implicitly to endure. This is more striking in his deployment of the term 'conquest', which he mobilizes frequently to describe his ambitions for francophonie: 'allez avec une francophonie conquérante', he tells his audience at Ouagadougou, 'et je serai à vos côtés' (Macron 2017f). Macron is doubtless seeking to demarcate himself in the first instance from attitudes of passivity or surrender which he sees as having characterized in recent decades the approach of French elites themselves to protecting their language (cf. Amirshahi and Rochebloine 2014, 7). At one level, this gives a harder-edged corrective to a sometimes rather irenic conception of how different languages really coexist with each other in given spaces (analysts such as de Swaan (2001) and Van Parijs (2011) have

noted that individual speakers may be ‘kind’ and hospitable to other languages, but that as specific group-level entities, coexisting languages tend to have competitive and indeed voracious relations with each other, especially if these are not moderated by institutional means). At another level, this lexical cluster of ‘conquest’ evokes all too manifestly the colonial roots of France’s current status as a world language.<sup>9</sup> The students’ reaction to his speech in Ougadougou suggests they were as alert to such overdetermined impulses as was Mabanckou. Macron himself appears to be conscious of the fraught terrain on which he is treading in his recourse to rather convoluted strategies of euphemization that attempt to soften the harder edges of his expansionist agenda:

Je veux défendre la langue française, je la défends, mais en ce qu’elle est une nation plus large que la France et en ce qu’elle est un continent où chaque morceau qui se conquiert ne se prend pas contre un autre mais dans l’accueil de l’autre. (2017d)

The world language system as conceived by de Swaan (2001) is characterized by self-confirming feedback loops leading to ‘stampedes’ of speakers to working and/or prestige languages perceived as strong and ‘collapses’ in speakers’ commitment to languages perceived as weak. This is because of the ‘network externalities’ through which the value of a language to a prospective speaker is dependent on the anticipated number of other speakers of the same language.<sup>10</sup> In this context, we can understand Macron’s endeavour to promote perceptions of the French language as a ‘strong’ entity possessing robust heft and purposeful momentum. The language’s past military and colonial associations, however, continue to inform strongly the prisms through which it is viewed by those in Africa and overseas territories, as well as Europe itself. Macron’s recourse to the lexis of conquest and reconquest is revealing, but seems singularly less felicitous than his mobilization of the other metaphorical clusters laid out above. French is unlikely to find a path to enduring global relevance through manifestly ‘conquering’ ambitions.

## The repurposing of French

We can understand in this light Macron’s turn to alternative paradigms for justifying the value of French as a transnational language in contexts where its intrinsic value can no longer be taken for granted and where the spread of English threatens to make other proposed lingua francas superfluous. Such justifications had been accumulating for some twenty years in the ‘primeval soup’ of policy reports and commissions (Ahearne 2022), but Macron brings them together for the first time in a forceful high-level synthesis.<sup>11</sup> The overarching framework for this synthesis is supplied by the broader notion of a ‘diplomatie de biens communs’ (Macron 2019), articulated on diverse occasions for presenting his foreign policy objectives as a whole. The challenge as regards French is to project this as a good with value that transcends its own expansion as a marker of *puissance* and that strengthens the case for a plural lingua franca regime across the world. Macron approaches this justificatory work at two levels: firstly, he organizes his projection of French in terms of its uses for ‘education, communication and creation’ (Macron 2018a); secondly, he postulates that the defence of French is linked in a special way to the wider defence of linguistic plurality, which is in its turn a second-order ‘common public good’ in its own right.

Taken individually, the measures and motifs assembled under Macron's triptych of 'education, communication and creation' are generally less novel than he suggests (with the exception of the Villers-Cotterêts *grand projet* to be discussed in the final section). They often constitute reformulated commitments or supplements to existing programmes (though with greater or lesser budgetary uplifts). The novelty lies in their aggregation, as so many policy 'semes', within a symbolically focused and holistic high-level presidential platform for the projection of the language.<sup>12</sup>

Macron is insistent that French must be 'useful' for those outside France, that it must give them 'access' to things that would otherwise be inaccessible (2017b, 2018a). As regards education, the emphasis is on French governmental support for African schooling systems (from 98 million euros in 2017 to an annual aggregate 354 million euros in 2020), giving access to common materials as a contribution to development objectives and in a campaign against 'obscurantism' (Macron 2017f, 2017e). Prominent motifs are his relaunch with Senegalese president Macky Sall of the multilateral *Partenariat mondial pour l'éducation* (2017 f); physical and virtual training programmes for teachers of French; support for bilingual primary schooling programmes combining French and pupils' African mother tongues as media of instruction; online resource platforms such as 'Imaginécôle', across 10 African francophone countries and targeting 7 million pupils, and *franceducation.fr*. More generally, French-language schooling across the world was strengthened through the expansion of certified bilingual programmes of education (from 209 in 2018 to 456 in 2021); places in international French lycées across the world were set to be doubled to 700,000 by 2030; funding for the *Fédération internationale des professeurs de français* was doubled and a *Journée internationale du professeur de français* instituted. Macron's desire to foreground the language's use as a gateway to higher education was somewhat hampered by his decision in 2018, not flagged up in the speeches studied, to introduce fees of around 3,000 to 4,000 euros for foreign students coming to France to study, which particularly affected opportunities for African students (who had hitherto paid the same 'inscription fees' as French students of around 200 euros). Nonetheless he highlights, as a kind of miniature *grand projet*, the creation of a *Maison des étudiants francophones* with 300 studios at Paris's *Cité internationale universitaire* (2018a); the facilitation of francophone campuses involving French higher education establishments and joint degrees in countries such as Tunisia and Senegal; a special 10 million euro fund designed to improve the 'quality' (if not quantity) of facilities offered by universities for visiting francophone students in France. The rhetorical function of such policy semes—putting to one side for present purposes the question of their implementation or adequacy—is to project for those who turn to French access to a richly resourced and maintained 'écosystème mondial du savoir, de l'intelligence et de la culture' (2018c).

As regards 'communications', the second rubric of his programme's triptych, Macron promises groups who tilt to the francosphere access to alternative informational networks and channels of influence. He celebrates the expanding 'firepower' of *France Médias Monde* (combining notably the quadrilingual television news channel *France 24* and multilingual *Radio France Internationale*), though without substantially raising its resources (2018a). There has been a doubling to 1400 of the number of francophone journalists trained annually under the auspices of *Canal France International*. Francophone online resources are being enriched through a Franco-Quebec working group on their 'découvrabilité', or through the launch in September 2020 of the platform *TV5Mondeplus*

(part of TV5 Monde, the international francophone channel funded principally by France). The language's commercial reach is being foregrounded, symbolically at least, by promoting an official label of endorsement for those transnational companies that integrate French and plurilingualism into their operations. Dedicated language training is being targeted towards the EU's high functionaries and diplomats with a view to resurrecting the language's eclipsed status as a 'real' working language in the institution. Whether these latter two measures can significantly alter the hard linguistic dynamics that have turned both the EU and international business to English as a near-universal medium is open to doubt (cf. Van Parijs 2011). They constitute, however, significant building blocks in Macron's assemblage promoting French as an instrument of influence in the contemporary world.

Macron is keen like others before him in recent decades to break with the language's indexical association with refined and 'hexagonal' artistic distinction (2018a). At the same time he does not want to diminish the language's desirability by reducing it to purely instrumental functions. He promises its users instead access to an abundance of 'creative' streams of artistic and intellectual content from across the world. This can be seen in the panoply of proper names deployed, from his 'personal representative for Francophonie' Leïla Slimani to other novelists and intellectuals like Aimé Césaire, Hampâté Bâ, Assia Djebar, Edouard Glissant, Achille Mbembe, Alain Mabanckou or Mohamed Mbougar Sarr. Certainly, Macron's endeavours to integrate some of the living holders of these names more closely into his enterprise have not always worked (Slimani did not want to be Minister for Culture; Mabanckou did not want to become involved at all). Nonetheless the semic charge simply of citing and listing such names plays an important part in his reprojection of the language's expanded 'imagined community'. Other support cited includes new 'pots' for francophone creative industries across Africa and the Caribbean, such as the AFD's 'Afrique créative' (1.5 million euros) and the multi-partner 'Jeune création francophone' (600,000 euros), as well as the existing 'Aide au cinéma du monde', run since 2012 by the CNC and the Institut français (6 million euros). Selected existing institutions in France have been re-instituted as 'pôles nationaux de référence pour la création francophone'. An 'États généraux du livre en langue française dans le monde' was prepared in Tunis for 2021, as well as a slew of literary translation prizes and the creation of a collective online 'Dictionnaire des francophonies' (launched in 2021). Measures to integrate francophone authors and artists from across the world into French educational curricula and general culture were proposed, notably through a series of 'Chaires francophones' in French universities and a 'Saison des cultures africaines' held in 2021. Macron does not, he says, want to set up an official policy for creation across Francophonie, whose own vitality, as he puts it, is recalcitrant to the 'cadre cartésien d'un programme politique' and 'excède tout ce qui chercherait à la canaliser' (Macron 2018a). But his symbolic accumulation of multiple policy motifs and references is designed, rhetorically at least, to leverage and channel that vitality.

The measures above resemble in some ways the 'capital enhancement' programmes that Pascale Casanova (2015) describes in relation to English, French, German and Italian across the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. These augment the value of a language as a specific good for its users by granting them access to educational advancement, networks of information and political or commercial influence, and extended cultural resources. In addition to such 'intrinsic good' arguments, Macron also seeks to modulate

in his own way the argument that to promote French is also to promote worldwide linguistic diversity as a kind of ‘second-order’ public good. Two extended quotations will give a sense of how these two levels of argument are nested within each other:

Je crois que ce combat fondamental pour notre langue, c’est un combat pour le plurilinguisme. [...] C’est reconnaître la part d’échange, de traduction qu’il y a dans et par le français (2018e)

La Francophonie doit faire droit aux autres langues, en particulier aux autres langues européennes mais à toutes les langues que la mondialisation fragilise ou isole. La Francophonie, c’est ce lieu où les mémoires des langues ne s’effacent pas, où elles circulent. Et notre mission est donc celle de continuer à traduire, d’accroître les traductions dans un sens et dans l’autre, d’être ce point de passage qui nous fait [*sic*] dans la Francophonie, mais aussi de défendre le wolof, le mandingue, le bassa, le lingala, le kikongo, le swahili, tous les créoles – mauricien, guadeloupéen, haïtien, martiniquais, réunionnais –, des langues qui, comme le français, rassemblent des millions de locuteurs au-delà des frontières et contribuent à la circulation des savoirs et des cultures. (2018a)

Of course, if plurilingualism is not widely recognized as a public good in its own right, some of the policies now pursued to promote French will struggle to find a foothold (for example, Macron’s championing of the principle that all EU countries implement policies ensuring their citizens learn at least two foreign languages, or the principle of dual-language immersion schooling in Africa). But at least in Macron’s presentation, French has a privileged relation to plurilingualism due to its putative role as a reticular hub in connecting and hosting the many other languages with which it is in contact. The validity of this claim, which is often placed, in a narrative that initially emerged in the 1990s, alongside France’s role in promoting the protective international principle of the ‘cultural exception’, would require separate critical scrutiny in its own right (the already cited reaction of Macron’s audience in Ouagadougou suggests how it might be challenged). But the salience of the claim across Macron’s speeches shows how the discursive contexts for the reprojected French language have changed and broadened.

### Macron’s grand projet: a reinstitution of the French language

In many ways, Macron’s project for a *Cité internationale de la langue française* at Villers-Cotterêts encapsulates his approach to the reprojected French language as a whole. This was originally planned for opening in early 2022 (before the end of Macron’s first *quinquennat*), but a full opening is now envisaged for 2023. Nonetheless, its conception and elaboration have provided a capstone for Macron’s overall language programme. It belongs to the tradition of cultural ‘grand projets’, which have become since Pompidou a staple expectation for the legacy of French presidents. These had fallen somewhat into abeyance under the variously curtailed presidential ambitions of Sarkozy and Hollande, but it was part of Macron’s symbolic resurrection of the office that he should launch a prominent such project of his own. No such project had been previously devoted to the French language as such (there are now few easily imaginable ‘gaps’ in the field of these grand projects), and it thus has allowed him further to distinguish his own presidential profile.<sup>13</sup> Its relatively ‘provincial’ location and comparatively modest price-tag (185 million euros) allows it to escape the criticisms of pharaonic Paris-centrism that have often attached to these projects. Indeed Macron has emphasized its contiguity to

one of France's now neglected peripheries (whose *Rassemblement national* mayor has been very supportive of the project (*Aujourd'hui en France*, 12 February 2019)). At a symbolic level at least, it allows for a fusion of the socio-economically peripheral, the national, and the international or cosmopolitan axes whose otherwise hard-to-reconcile asperities have constituted neuralgic dividing lines for Macron's presidency.

Early 'origin myths' around the project suggested that the idea occurred to Macron during a visit in the run-up to the 2017 presidential elections to the dilapidated chateau in his home province of Picardy. In fact, the idea had been floating since at least 2016 as heritage specialists wondered what could be done to save this crumbling architectural relic (*Aujourd'hui en France*, 29 April 2016). But Macron certainly showed considerable acumen in coupling that buried idea with the political window of his presidency. It enabled him to reinvest a symbol of the origins of the national language (the place name is indelibly associated with the 1539 edict which instituted French as the nation's legal and administrative language and which contains the oldest articles in current French law). The planned permanent exhibitions promise to give full weight to the long historical relation between the French State and its language—and it will be interesting, once the site is open and a full evaluation is possible, to see how they treat the history of its 'conquest' over other languages on metropolitan French territory.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, they will display the future-orientated 'invention continue' of this 'langue composite' shot through with 'ses emprunts à d'autres langues' and the 'dynamisme' of 'une langue de rayonnement global' (Cité internationale de la langue française 2022). Whether less euphoriant and more conflicted aspects of its past, present and future across the world will find a place is, again, an open question. In this it partakes in the boldness but also the ambiguities and 'versatility' of Macron's overall reprojection and reframing for the world and his people of the nation's language.

## Conclusion

The defence by French presidents of French and its role as an international language is not new, and can be traced back to the beginnings of the Fifth Republic (and indeed well before). The alliance of French with the causes of cultural diversity and plurilingualism is a little newer, but can be seen at work across the presidencies of François Mitterrand and, especially, Jacques Chirac. We have argued in this article, however, that Macron invested the projection of the French language as a more prominent focus for high-level presidential cultural policy than any of his predecessors. Moreover, this reprojection of French brought with it significant elements of novelty for such high-level policy. These concerned most notably: the insistence that there is not a single 'French' with its normative centre in France, but a plurality of 'Frenches' across a polycentric francophone space; the reworking through recourse to postcolonial writers and critical thinkers of the metaphors through which the French language is represented for the world; and the casting of French in particular and multilingualism more generally as useful or attractive 'global public goods'.

For his critics, the performances through which Macron communicated such shifts are testament to his ambiguous rhetorical 'versatility', with a commitment to shared 'Frenches' allowing him to euphemize or elide domestic and international divisions. These performances nonetheless resonated with key axes in Macron's overall approach



to foreign policy: the emphasis on France's significance in a multilaterally regulated world system; the commitment to European integration and the EU's pluralized cultural identity; the reconfiguring of relations between France and Africa; a 'diplomacy of common goods'; a desire to engage other nations' 'civil societies' beyond established institutional and political interlocutors. Like other aspects of Macron's overall political programme, the *élan* that characterized his reprojection of the French language was interrupted from 2020 by the crises of Covid and Ukraine. There were also significant resistances to some of his ambitions (inhabitants of Africa and the rest of Europe did not always share his ideas about the futures of French in their regions and institutions). It will be interesting to observe how the theme of the French language is taken up again across Macron's second *quinquennat*.

## Notes

1. I am grateful to the two anonymous referees for their help in improving this article.
2. The accounts of presidential approaches to institutional Francophonie up to 2007 in this section are indebted to the forensic archival research of Frédéric Turpin (2018, 2020, 2022). In this article, following common convention, I use Francophonie with a capital letter to designate the institutional entity (since 2005 the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*) 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).
3. Mayaffre's corpus is restricted only to those speeches by Macron delivered within France itself, and so excludes those speeches in my primary corpus which were delivered abroad. These would not, however, significantly challenge the core stylistic characteristics which he identifies across the domestic speeches.
4. On the mutating positions of the 'intellectual' ENS and the 'politico-administrative' ENA within France's overall 'field of power', see Bourdieu (1989). In a variant perhaps of the distinguished *désinvolture* through which the most eminently assured holders of a title disparage the title itself, Macron has now, of course, abolished the ENA.
5. For a snapshot of positions in relation to the French language adopted by other presidential candidates in 2017 see Dagen (2017) (though it should be noted that the positions were articulated as responses to the falling of the *Journée internationale de la Francophonie* during the presidential campaign, rather than through deliberate decisions to foreground the French language as a campaign issue).
6. On the origins of this reference, and the presuppositions informing it, see Attali (2014), Amirshahi and Rochebloine (2014).
7. On the 'indexical' functions of language representations, see Blommaert (2010).
8. For detailed critical discussion of Macron's invocation in his *Institut de France* speech of a 'langue-monde' and its relations to notions of a 'littérature-monde' developed by various writers since 2007, see Lebsanft (2019).
9. A prehistory of violence and conquest as well as resistance thereto lies behind most of today's 'world languages' (Ostler 2005).
10. '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, and notably to the self-reinforcing processes of language expansion and collapse).
11. On the fermentation of ideas in the 'policy primeval soup' and their activation in the context of political 'windows', see Kingdon (2003).

12. These policy measures and details of their ongoing implementation as summarized here can be found mostly in the keynote *Institut de France* speech, the associated press dossier and follow-up tracking documents for subsequent years (Macron 2018a; Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2018; Présidence de la République 2019, 2021).
13. Jacques Chirac set in motion in 2002 a project for a 'Maison de la Francophonie' bringing together the different components of the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*. After many vicissitudes, this was finally inaugurated in 2011 as the organization's institutional home—but this attribution of an already existing prestigious Parisian address to an existing organization never attained the resonance of a presidential *grand projet*.
14. On the tensions involved in Macron's relations to France's regional languages during his *quinquennat*, which it has not been possible to treat in this article, see Darame (2021).

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