

Population & Societies

No English please! Survey on the languages used for research and teaching in France

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Does English have a rightful place in our university lecture theatres? Only for foreigners, says the law of 1994, or if the subject is of an “international nature”. Yet science is international by definition, not by exception. Can the law prevent scholars and teachers from using the international languages of science, beginning with English? An INED survey puts the debate in perspective by exploring the use of languages by discipline and by generation.

Should French universities be allowed to teach in English? This question, first raised in 1994 when the “Toubon Act” was debated in parliament, has raised its head again with a new higher education and research bill that includes a provision to authorize English-language classes in certain international programmes (Box 1). Presented on 20 March 2013 to the Council of Ministers, it received a hostile response from the Académie française, which the next day demanded its withdrawal on the grounds that it “fosters the marginalization of our language”. [1] For the President of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), along with several Nobel prize winners and Fields medallists, on the other hand, it is the rejection of English that threatens to marginalize French research and do harm to the country. [2]

Science, international by exception?

To reassure the research community, the Toubon Act included several exceptions to the rule of French-only teaching: foreign students, foreign teachers, or “teaching of an international nature”. Yet science is international by definition, not by exception. Depending on the intended audience, its vehicle may be English, the national language or the languages of the cultures under study. Since teaching is anchored in research, it makes sense to use the same languages for both. Over the last twenty years, calls for projects, scientific journals, assessment committees, academic recruitment and student

mobility have all become increasingly internationalized, so this broad interpretation of the law is in phase with ongoing trends. Some 18% of Master’s students, and 41% of PhD students in France are foreigners. [3] Yet the idea of granting an “exemption” for classes on international programmes implies a return to a more restrictive interpretation of the law. Indeed, far from extending the universities’ freedom of initiative, it may have the quite opposite effect.

The ELVIRE survey on the use of modern languages in French public research sheds new light on the debate. It was conducted by INED between 2007 and 2009 on a sample of 1,963 research laboratory directors and 8,883 researchers, with support from the Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France (DGLFLF). It explores the use of French, English and other languages in all types of research activity, including teaching, and provides an overview of the situation in France, 18 years after the Toubon Act came into force.

Marginalization of French in the hard sciences

When asked to rank the languages used internationally in their field (for all types of activity), the laboratory directors provided clear-cut answers: for 83%, English is the most widely used language in their own field, and is

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often the only working language (42 %). French comes first for just 10% (8% French only), and a mere 3% rank French and English equally. When French is mentioned, three times out of four it ranks as a second language behind English. Only 4% of laboratories give top place to another language (in order: Spanish, German, Italian).

A total of 42% of researchers (all disciplines, all levels of seniority) feel that their grasp of English is imperfect, but 77% consider that “its use has become so widespread in research that the choice of language is a foregone conclusion”. A full 90% of researchers born in the 1980s agree with this statement, and it is this age group that expresses strongest demand for more language lessons and practice. In the so-called “hard” and reputedly “exact” sciences, French is not threatened with marginalization; it is already marginal: just 2% of laboratory directors rank French above other languages, or claim that it is used exclusively, versus 96% for English (Figure 1). While the situation is more heterogeneous in the humanities and social sciences, 59% of laboratory directors report that English holds a dominant position, and just 23% cite French. We note, however, the somewhat tautological nature of the predominance of French in French language and literature departments, and in departments specializing in French history and law, the expectation being that foreign colleagues will give precedence to French in these same subject areas.

Exclusive or dominant use of English

These judgements are confirmed by the practices of researchers – reading, understanding, speaking, writing, learning, sending out for translation, publishing, working abroad, teaching – explored in detail by the ELVIRE survey. Respondents could cite multiple languages in their

answers, and graduated response categories were used. [3] Just a few key findings are given here, based on researchers’ publications (Figure 2).

In the hard sciences, most articles are published in international journals and French is marginal. In the social sciences, researchers publish numerous books as author or co-author, but only a minority publish exclusively in French over a one-year period; many now prefer to alternate between French and English. Scientific meetings are another major activity. If a public laboratory holds a meeting in a foreign language in France, it is legally obliged to provide interpreting services into French. Yet 90% of the hard science laboratories which held meetings during the year preceding the survey, did so without an interpreter! At 27%, the proportion is lower in the humanities and social sciences, but sizeable nonetheless. Another equally illegal option involves alternating French and English without an interpreter. Over a year, 62% of laboratories applied this solution in the social sciences and 34% in the hard sciences. In all, only 20% of conference organizers were able to afford interpreters at least once in the year, falling back onto illegal solutions thereafter. For the public laboratories’ multilingual websites, the situation is similar: while French-English bilingual sites are illegal, the survey reveals that in 2008 they outnumbered the trilingual sites required under the law by twelve to one!

Fewer young multilingual researchers

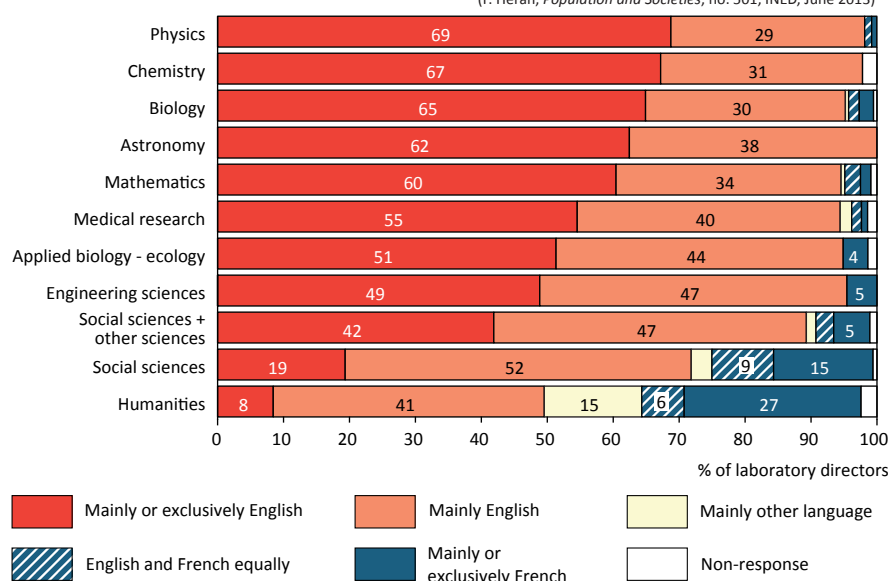
All other things being equal, a researcher’s grade, length of tenure, social origin and mother tongue have little influence on the choice of foreign language used in scientific activities. Sex has no effect. The two determining factors are age and, above all, scientific discipline.

From the oldest to the youngest, there is a doubling of the proportion of researchers who report practices and attitudes that are favourable to English: using English rather than German, Spanish or Italian as working language (Figure 3); recognizing that publishing in French reduces the chances of becoming known or of getting promotion; accepting assessment in English, but also considering that English can be promoted while still defending the French language (figure 3).

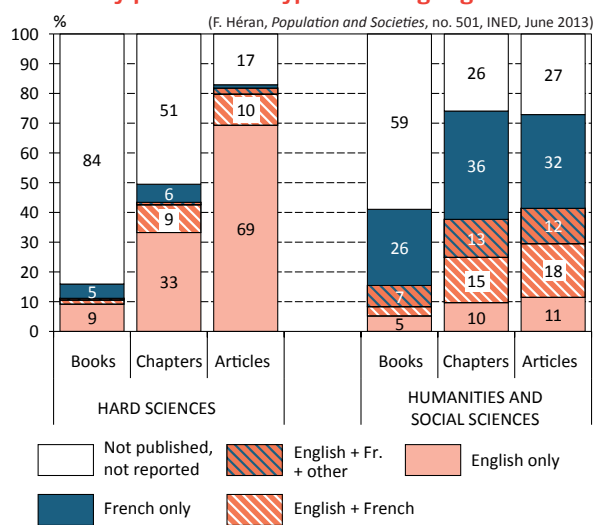
But the choice of language depends even more strongly on the scientific discipline. In life sciences and engineering, English holds a monopoly position which unifies the scientific field by promoting international exchanges.

Figure 1. International languages used in research by discipline

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Source: ELVIRE survey, INED/DGLFLF, 2008-2009.

Figure 2. Distribution of researchers by publication type and language *

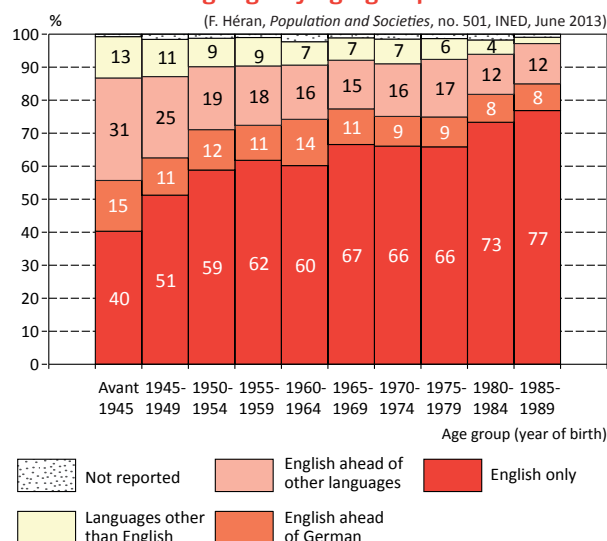
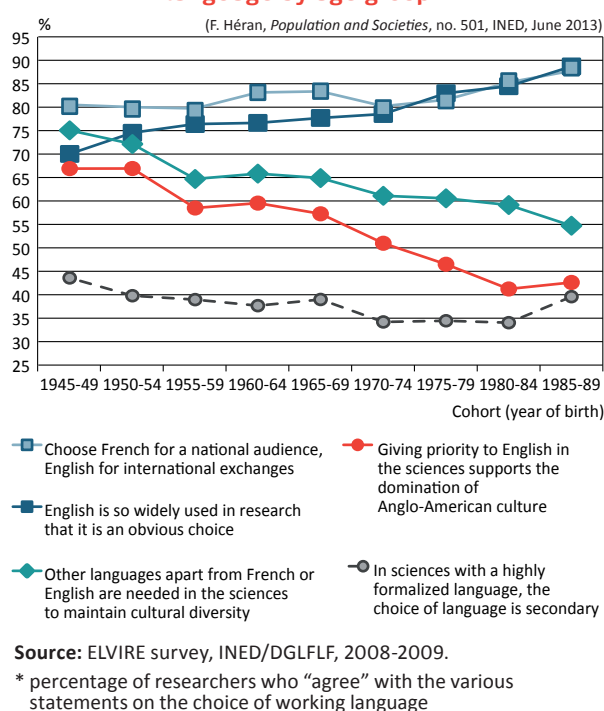
Psychology and economics are also attracted by this model. By contrast, the humanities, attached to cultural and intellectual diversity, are still resolutely multilingual. Astronomy and mathematics lie at the half-way point, followed by the social sciences, where English is now dominant but does not yet hold a monopoly.

A quarter of teachers give classes in English

All languages combined, 95% of French academics gave "regular classes or seminars" to students in higher education in 2007-2008. Of this number, 9% reported giving "regular" classes in English, and 17% "occasional" classes, making a total of 26%. Junior and senior researchers teach classes half as often as university academics, but twice as many do so in English: 55% teach at a university, of whom 13% "regularly" in English and 34% "occasionally", making a total of 47%. Proportions are around the average in the hard sciences, already equipped with a formalized language, but higher in the political sciences (15% + 22%) and in management (10% + 23%). In fact, the catalogue of courses in English drawn up by the Campus France agency gets thicker every year.

A lesser propensity to blame the American empire

These findings point to three conclusions. First, it is futile to denounce the hegemony of English in technological disciplines, life sciences and formalized subjects such as economics or mathematics. A coercive policy obliging them to adopt the humanities model would be doomed to failure. Second, English will never be dislodged by an Anglophobic defence of French. Far fewer researchers now point the finger at Anglo-Saxon imperialism: while 67% of those

Figure 3. Choice of foreign language by age group ***Figure 4. Researchers' opinions on working language by age group ***

born before 1955 still consider that "giving priority to English in science contributes to the domination of Anglo-American culture", the proportion is just 40% among those born in the 1980s (Figure 4). The idea that "French must be defended" as the language of research is similarly in decline: 67% among the oldest age group, 38% among the youngest. However, there is broad agreement with the idea that "French should be preferred for a national audience, and English for international exchanges" (70% among the oldest and 90% among the youngest).

Box 1. The Toubon Act of 1994 and its draft amendment

Under article L. 121-3 of the Education Code, which uses the terms of the Toubon Act of 4 August 1994:

I. The command of the French language and a knowledge of two other languages are among the fundamental objectives of teaching.

II. The language used for teaching and examinations, and for theses and dissertations in public and private teaching establishments is French, except when the use of another language is justified by the teaching requirements of regional or foreign languages and cultures, or when the teachers are foreigners in guest or associate teaching positions.

Foreign schools, or schools opened specifically for foreign students, and establishments offering international courses are not bound by this obligation."

Under the policy bill for higher education and research presented by Mme Fioraso to the Council of Ministers of 20 March 2013, it is suggested that the following provision be added before the above paragraph: "Exceptions may also be justified by the nature of certain teaching courses, such as those dispensed under a partnership with a foreign or international institution, as provided for in article L. 123-7, or as part of a European programme."

Box 2. The Toubon Act, protecting consumers and employees

According to the annual report of the Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France, the government body responsible for policing the use of French, some 120 complaints are filed each year under the Toubon Act, of which around thirty (a figure provided by the French consumer protection authority) lead to a conviction. But they all concern problems of product labelling or services provided in a foreign language, for which the Toubon Act strengthened the controls introduced in 1975 under the Bas-Auriol Act. None of these convictions concerned scientific research activities. However, officials of the French Ministry of Higher Education have, on occasion, cited the Act as grounds for refusing to certify a teaching programme or a qualification.

The judgement against the National Institute for Health and Medical Research (INSERM) pronounced in June 2008 by the administrative tribunal of Paris does not contradict this observation. The director had announced that the scientific council – whose members include foreign experts – would audition its management teams in English as part of the renewal process. Alerted by employees who wanted to follow the debate, the trades unions lodged a successful complaint. It was not the use of English in research (teaching, publications, theses, lectures, websites, etc.) that was deemed unlawful by the courts, but its use without translation in the management of research personnel, contrary to the requirements of the Labour Code that were strengthened by the Toubon Act.

The neutral effect of the Toubon Act

Despite the Toubon Act, the use of English in French research has increased inexorably, among younger researchers especially: for 81% of laboratory directors – no fewer in the social sciences (83%) than in the hard sciences (79%) – English has progressively established itself as the dominant language in their field. Only 4% in the social sciences and 1% in the hard sciences think that the use of French is increasing. French scientists have never done so much research and teaching in English. In fact, in the 18 years since the Act came into force, no-one has ever been convicted for engaging in an English-language research activity on French territory, despite the whistle-blowing powers granted to "associations for the defence of French" set up on the same model as consumer associations (Box 2). But students and researchers are not consumers needing protection. The "right to understand" competes with the duty to learn. It is unlikely that a paragraph added to or removed from the law will make any difference to a trend that is so strongly supported by the younger generations and so important for the global advancement of science. It would be more sensible to encourage linguistic pluralism in the humanities and the social sciences, disciplines where it has a meaningful role to play. Upon two conditions however: we must recognize that English as a language of exchange can be associated with French as a language of debate; and we must abandon coercive measures in favour of positive incentives that reflect the realities of today's world.

References

- [1] <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/actualites/declarationde-lacademie-francaise-du-21-mars-2013>.
- [2] "Facultés : les cours en anglais sont une chance et une réalité", *Le Monde*, 8 May 2013, text signed by Fr. Barré-Sinoussi, V. Berger, A. Fuchs, S. Haroche, A. Petit, C. Villani.
- [3] "Les étudiants étrangers", in *Repères et références statistiques 2012 sur les enseignements, la formation et la recherche*, pp. 196-201.
- [4] F. Héran, *L'usage des langues dans la recherche publique en France, d'après l'enquête ELVIRE*, INED, *Documents de travail*, 194, 2013.

Abstract

A survey of public-sector researchers and academics shows that English is used almost exclusively as the international language of dialogue in the hard sciences, and is also well-established in the humanities and social sciences. English is also the language of choice for publications, meetings held in France and websites. A quarter of the surveyed researchers and academics had taught a class in English during the year. The Toubon Act of 1994 protects consumers and employees, but has not held back the expansion of English as the international language of communication in science.