

Liminal Spaces: Understanding La Francophonie and Francophone Literature

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Abstract

This article delves into the intricate tapestry of “La Francophonie” and its profound resonance with Francophone literature. It seeks to untangle the complex threads that bind the French-speaking world to the domain of literary expression. Moving beyond mere linguistic associations, this paper explores the cultural, political, and social dimensions that shape the expansive realm of Francophone literature. By doing so, it aims to reveal how cultural diversity, varying political contexts, and social dynamics profoundly influence the production of literature within La Francophonie. The broader implication of this article is to contribute to dissecting the multifaceted relationship between language and literature, emphasizing the need to comprehend the complex interplay between these elements to fully grasp the literary heritage of the Francophone world.

Keywords : Cultural diversity, francophone literature, Francophonie, social dynamics

Résumé

Cet article explore « La Francophonie » et sa profonde résonance avec la littérature francophone. Il vise à apporter un éclairage sur les liens complexes qui relient le monde francophone et le domaine de la création littéraire. En allant au-delà des simples rapports linguistiques, cet article explore les influences culturelles, politiques et sociales qui façonnent la littérature francophone. Cette démarche permet de saisir comment la diversité culturelle, les contextes politiques variés et les dynamiques sociales influencent la production littéraire au sein de La Francophonie. En soulignant les multiples facettes de cette union entre langue et littérature, cet article permet de comprendre comment l’interaction complexe entre les éléments précités permet de mieux appréhender l’héritage littéraire francophone.

Mots-clés : Diversité culturelle, dynamiques sociales, littérature francophone, Francophonie

The Francophone world, also known as “La Francophonie,” represents a vast tapestry of cultures, languages, and narratives that span across continents (Poissonnier, 2021). Rooted in the historical legacy of the French language and its enduring influence, this linguistic and cultural space encapsulates a myriad of voices and experiences. Within this rich mosaic, Francophone literature emerges as a dynamic and multifaceted medium of expression reflecting the complex interplay between language, identity, history, and global interconnectedness. In an era marked by globalization and the growing significance of cross-cultural dialogues, the study of Francophone literature takes on added importance (Clavaron, 2018). Understanding this literature is not only a matter of linguistic appreciation but a window through which a diverse and evolving human experience is revealed. Francophone literature stands as a testament to the ever-shifting nature of identity, diaspora, and intercultural dialogue.

La Francophonie transcends geographical borders, bringing together diverse regions, nations, and cultures under the common thread of the French language. It constitutes a multifaceted entity with a rich tapestry of languages, identities, and histories, ranging from across the globe. Understanding this complex mosaic is paramount to appreciating the cultural, political, and social factors that shape Francophone literature. Francophone authors, hailing from diverse corners of the French-speaking world, contribute to a collective dialogue, forging connections that resonate far beyond their linguistic origins.

Understanding La Francophonie and its interplay with Francophone literature is an exploration of a vast and interconnected world, where language, identity, and cultural diversity intersect. In recent years, the study of Francophonie and Francophone literature has gained increasing relevance, coinciding with a global shift towards recognizing the importance of preserving and celebrating linguistic and cultural diversity (Groff, Pilote and Vieux-Fort, 2016; Edwards, 2019; Marker, 2022). This exploration into the interconnectedness of La Francophonie and Francophone literature is timely and relevant. It considers the various layers of identity, politics, history, and social dynamics present within Francophone societies, recognizing the intricate relationship between language and cultural expression. Moreover, in the context of today’s globalized world, this inquiry sheds light on the power of literature as a means of understanding, celebrating, and, at times, challenging cultural and linguistic diversity.

This article delves into these themes, investigating the essence of La Francophonie, the role of French as a global language, and the richness of Francophone literature that transcends national boundaries. It is an invitation to explore the complexities of identity, culture, and heritage within the vast tapestry of the organization.

1- La Francophonie: Origins, Definitions and Spaces

1-1 A Linguistic Community and More

La Francophonie represents not only a linguistic community but a complex web of interconnected cultures, identities, and historical narratives. While it is grounded in the use of the French language, its significance extends far beyond linguistic ties. At its core, La

Francophonie is a linguistic community that unites speakers of French across the world. Yet, within this linguistic unity, a vibrant mix of cultural, historical, and social diversity unfolds.

Back in 1977, in his attempt to define the term, Jean Marc Léger asserts: “vocabulaire au bonheur éminemment discutable, la francophonie a quelque chose d’une version contemporaine de l’auberge espagnole, chacun y trouve ou croit y trouver ce qu’il y a apporté” (qtd in Deniau 11).¹ The ambiguity or porosity of the concept is commensurate with its many definitions which often fail to harmonize. La Francophonie indeed can be defined on linguistic, geographical, institutional, and even ideological grounds. Though it makes the shine and spread of the French language and culture worldwide its main mission, the institution nonetheless claims to be an advocate of cultural diversity through which a collective “Francophone” identity is proclaimed. Indeed, the OIF (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie) proudly describes its members as those who have the French language in common, “le français en partage.” This very notion of universalism, when read into the definition of La Francophonie, uncannily reminds of the humanistic investment of the French language during colonization.² For the French, their language indeed is more than a mere communication tool; it is endowed with values and virtues that few other languages have. As early as 1783, in *Discours sur l’universalité de la langue française*, Antoine Rivarol referring to the characteristics of the French language said; “Ce qui n’est pas clair, n’est pas français; ce qui n’est pas clair est encore anglais, italien, grec ou latin.”³ This conception of the French language as inherently “superior”—even in relation to other Western languages—will be carried into the newly linguistic space that La Francophonie constitutes. Regardless of the other languages in the many countries which form the institution, only French is in fact used and promoted.

Writers in the Francophone world, unlike their Anglophone counterparts, rarely debate the pertinence of choosing French as their authorial language. Even when such concepts as Négritude (Irele, 1965; Senghor, 1967; Camara, 2020) or Créolité (Bernabé and al., 1993; Price, 2017) are brought forth, countries and people members of La Francophonie all plead allegiance to the French language; and in former French colonies, the French language often constitutes an official language—if not the sole official language—at the expense of other local vernaculars. This recognition and promotion of French in a space where multiple other languages are used highlights the big dilemma of the institution; how can an organization genuinely claim to celebrate diversity at the same time that it makes the acknowledgment of one single language (and culture), among many others, its sine qua non condition of entry? Is

¹ “A highly debatable terminology, Francophonie is somewhat reminiscent of the Spanish Inn where everybody can find, or at least believe they can find what they brought” (translation mine).

² La Francophonie cannot thoroughly be understood without a historical reading of the (hi)story of France and its colonial expansion (Milhaud, 2006; Najjar, 2010; Klinkenberg, 2017). The geographical contours of the institution, in many respects, espouse the limits of the former French empire, with France itself playing a significant role in the contemporary activities of the organization (Kohnert, 2022).

³ What is not clear is not the French. What is not clear is rather English, Italian, Greek or Latin (translation mine).

La Francophonie an authentic space that celebrates cultural diversity or is the belief in plurality in the institution a mere “intellectual utopia” as Olivier Milhaud argues?

To answer these questions, we have to pay an even closer attention to the significance of the adjective “Francophone.” In fact, if in the expression “Francophone Literature” Francophone often means productions written in French and yet different from that of the French metropolis, the qualifier Francophone, derived from the concept of Francophonie on the other hand, defines a shared, much broader heterogeneous heritage that only needs to be about or expressed in French. According to Milhaud, Francophone signifies a “place of cultural universality through linguistic diversity;” an understanding of the attribute, to say the least, different from that of Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (2003), who instead, advance the following:

The use of the epithet ‘Francophone’ itself—in phrases such as ‘littérature francophone’ [Francophone literature], referring to all literatures written in French except that produced in France itself--suggests a neo-colonial segregation and a hierarchization of cultures that perpetuates the binary divide on which, despite the rhetoric of a ‘civilizing mission,’ colonization depended for its expansion and consolidation. (3)

There actually exists a multiplicity of understandings for the qualifier “Francophone” and consequently equally various perceptions of Francophonie that are not necessarily tied to its root adjective. Today, over sixty years after most African countries gained their independence, questions about the true nature of the concept and of relationships between France and the countries that once made up its empire are still relevant. With “la Françafrique,” a reality that bears witness to the close ties that still unite the former colonizing power to its then colonies (Pean, 2012; Alleno, 2020; Medushevskiy and Shishkina, 2022) a major interrogation regarding La Francophonie, an organization in many ways reminiscent of that historical past, is the conservation and maintenance of a “French empire” in the wake of decolonization.

This linguistic hegemony of the French language and culture will however be challenged by political, cultural, or even literary personalities within the institution. From Lucien Bouchard⁴ to Leopold Sedar Senghor,⁵ dissonant voices were raised to protest a monoglossic, Franco-French understanding of La Francophonie as a space where only the French language and culture are given visibility and allowed to flourish. Indeed, in the light of the differential treatment between French and local vernaculars in former French colonies,⁶

⁴ Lucien Bouchard was the Quebec Premier from 1996 to 2001. During the 1999 summit of La Francophonie held in Moncton, New Brunswick, he stressed that the organization should and ought to be a multicultural space wherein all the different cultures that make up the institution will be allowed to flourish. For the first time in the life of the organization the notion of “diversité culturelle” (cultural diversity) was brought forth, a concept Bouchard defined as “l’expression de l’identité des peuples” (the expression of people’s identities).

⁵ Long before Bouchard, Leopold Senghor talked about “le dialogue des cultures” (“the dialogue of cultures”).

⁶ The French language policies in their former colonies left no room for expression in local vernaculars in official spaces.

some critics saw and continue to see in La Francophonie, especially in the allegiance to the French language, another outlet for France's domination, yet another avatar of colonization.

1-2 A Politically-Loaded Concept

Even though the official ground works of the organization were laid only in 1969 by personalities who did not originate from the French metropolis,⁷ a quick look back at history actually brings to light the existence of prior venues where similar missions and objectives to that of La Francophonie were already brought forth.⁸ Indeed, before the independence of the majority of its former colonies in the 1960's, regardless of the rhetoric which insists on France's initial disapproval of La Francophonie, critics did not fail to properly account for the uncanny coincidences between the evolution of the term and France's wish to gain greater visibility and power on the international scene. At a time when major political changes were taking place in the world,⁹ France particularly, a country which presided over one of the largest colonial empires, only second to Britain, and then in a state of decline regarding its global influence,¹⁰ saw in La Francophonie a unique stage whereby it could make its voice heard louder across the world. By channelling its voice through La Francophonie, France indeed makes sure it has a stronger footing worldwide and that it is better geared to fight a political Anglo-American hegemony, but also—and not the least important—that it can counter and limit the growing influence of the English language and its “negative effects” on the lustre and prestige of the French language.

La Francophonie, as a consequence, has been looked at as a loaded concept whereby France seeks to further and sustain its linguistic and political presence on the international scene. However, interestingly enough, as noted earlier on, France itself, at least, in its official discourse, was against the creation of La Francophonie in the first place. The ground works of the institution were laid by personalities outside of the Hexagon. What Onésime Reclus thought of in abstract terms, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Habib Bourguiba and Hamani Diori turned into a more palatable organization; an organization however still carrying the “lofty” goal of spreading and sustaining the French language and culture worldwide.

From discussions regarding its postcolonial nature to the exclusive role and place of the French language in the life of the institution through the oversight of the French Academy—which filters and vigorously regulates the language often according to Franco-French standards

⁷ See Brian Weinstein's article for an analysis of how France, unofficially, supported the background talks that led up to the actual organization. And for a detailed report on the major chronological events in the life of the organization, see this website: <http://www.francophonie.org/Chronology.html>.

⁸ In 1946 the French Union was created under the Fourth Republic, as a political entity aimed at replacing the French Empire. Later in 1958, under General de Gaulle, The French Community was born, an attempt to still keep emancipated former colonies under the rule of France. That coalition however fell apart as most, if not all, of the French colonies, at least in Africa, acceded to their independence the year of 1960.

⁹ Here I have in mind development all over Eastern Europe, not to mention changes that were going in Africa as well. In the words of Gabrielle Parker, “[...] Francophonie's further redefinition in the 1990's coincides, politically, with a readjustment of influences at global level, with the fall of the Soviet Empire, the reunification of Germany, and the new “scramble” for Africa triggered by the [new] world order” (93).

¹⁰ See Weinstein's article for more details on France's dwindling power on the international scene.

mainly—La Francophonie is often viewed by critics as an organization that essentially exists to serve and further France’s domination.¹¹ As a consequence, a lot of ink has been spilled in attempts not only to define the term, but also to address the different spaces the evocation of the concept brings about. For many critics from the Hexagon, La Francophonie is an organization with no ties to the history of the French empire (Lalanne-Berdouticq, 1979; Martinet, 1962). This strong will to dissociate France’s imperial past from any aspect of La Francophonie echoes what Henri Boussi terms the “Vichy syndrome” which he defines as an “active suppression of colonial memory” (qtd in Forsdisck and Murphy, 2). This position however, short of historical amnesia, can hardly be argued convincingly. Everything in La Francophonie—from the origins of the word, to the primordial role played by France in the life of the organization—points back to the spread of the French Empire and the subsequent independence of its then colonies. The adjective Francophone is not just understood as a linguistic and a geographical community; but also as a community which uncannily resembles that of the lost French empire.¹²

The parallels between La Francophonie and France’s imperialism and cultural domination during colonization dim the lights on the definition of the organization as a linguistic community. More often than not, the debate surrounding La Francophonie centers around more abstract and more ideological issues. Xavier Deniau, as a matter of fact, observes that in any serious discussion of La Francophonie, “la simple constatation linguistique s’efface au profit de sens plus diffus peut être, mais également plus philosophiques”¹³ (14). Just how elusive the concept can be is best articulated in the words of Habib Bourguiba, one of the official founding fathers of the International Organization of la Francophonie. Bourguiba indeed, speaking about the humanistic values of the French language—the backbone of the organization—places the institution on an ahistorical, timeless, even ubiquitous level. He contended “[La Francophonie] is situated beyond politics or geography—its criteria are above all philosophical, involving the great ideals of 1789 and the aspirations of humanity to freedom, dialogue and mutual support” (qtd in Salhi 3). This point of view, if anything, speaks to the difficulty of appropriately and meaningfully containing the term.

2- Francophonie and Francophone Literature

2-1- Contesting a “French” Hegemony

With the mission of La Francophonie to spread the influence of the French language and culture beyond France’s hexagonal limits, a newer configuration of the organization started to

¹¹ Claims of La Francophonie furthering France domination do not necessarily come out of a vacuum. France indeed controls among other things: the finances of the organization as well as the Académie Française which oversees usage of the French language.

¹² With the exceptions of Algeria (who never was a member) and Rwanda and Burundi who left the organization (Rwanda joined the Commonwealth in 2009), almost all former colonies—now independent states—are members of La Francophonie. The organization is not limited to the countries that once made up France’s empire, but it includes the majority of them.

¹³ The simple linguistic connotation gives way to perhaps more diffuse, but also more philosophical meanings (translation mine).

take shape; an understanding of the concept that calls for a rethinking of the pre-established “virtual” linguistic community as the new borders of the French Empire following colonization would delineate the geographical “boundaries” of the organization. Interestingly enough, mapping these two connotations—linguistic and geographical—would turn out to be a nearly-impossible task.¹⁴ Indeed, the historic limits of the then French Empire, which, in the wake of colonization made the greatest contribution yet to what is now commonly referred to as La Francophonie, did not necessarily coincide with the linguistic cartography of the French language as conceptualized by Reclus. From South America to Eastern Europe, the French language extended well beyond the confines of France’s domination; a situation which led critics, Francophone critics particularly, to question the attraction of the French language and culture around the world (Senghor, 1965). Despite the rhetorical goal of La Francophonie to promote diversity, the organization, by all actual standards, appears as a vehicular tool in the promotion of a Franco-French culture.¹⁵ This focus on France’s interests is further illustrated by the presence of the French Academy determining acceptable standards of grammar, vocabulary as well as registers of languages. Traditionally—prior to the newfound interest in Francophone literature—registers of French outside the ones spoken in the Hexagon were dismissed from any serious study of the French language.¹⁶ This linguistic hegemony, though at first readily accepted by the colonized,¹⁷ would increasingly become a topic of controversy, especially in the years after decolonization.

2-2- Francophone Authors’ “Surconscience Linguistique”

By definition, a Francophone author uses the French language as his/her medium of written expression. Contrary to metropolitan French authors, Francophones usually do not speak French as their only-or even first-language. More often than not, they evolve in environments where multiple languages are used. Their choice of French is motivated by more than simply linguistic reasons; it is also a political choice. By writing in French, Francophone authors make sure they reach a wider audience well beyond the confines of the communities where their local vernaculars are spoken. This context which requires the Francophone author, a person with plurilingual abilities, to express him/herself in French mainly, creates a situation where he/she

¹⁴ In its linguistic sense, La Francophonie regroups all countries where French is used as an official or simply as a vehicular language. The case of Algeria, a country that used to be part of the French empire and yet not a member of La Francophonie is often brought up to highlight the difficulty of mapping the different areas of the institution.

¹⁵ See Réda Bensmaïa and Alyson Waters in their article entitled “Francophonie” where they discuss how, in the academic world, up to the late 1980’s French literature was unambiguously understood to mean the exclusive study of texts and authors from the Hexagon.

¹⁶ Here a cautionary note is called for as one should also be reminded that in the Hexagon, contrary to what is officially portrayed, different dialects and registers are actually in use in France itself. For more information, see Heather William’s article entitled “‘Separisianisme,’ or internal colonialism.” And on the variations of the Hexagonal register, I particularly have in mind differences in the French spoken in Quebec and Africa.

¹⁷ In Senegal for example, there was the infamous “symbole” that, to an extent, symbolized how deeply the colonized internalized the superiority of the French language. Traditionally, the “symbole” was a piece of wood or a bone out of which a chain meant to symbolize shame was made and passed around to anybody who was caught speaking a language other than French in the school premises.

becomes particularly aware of the many languages in his/her environment; a condition Lise Gauvin terms “surconscience linguistique.”

With globalization, migration, hybridity and multiculturalism as heightened realities, the compartmentalisation of languages according to social prestige which dictated diglossia (and to an extent also informs the promotion of French within La Francophonie) becomes less and less relevant, even in former French colonies. Various languages cohabit not only in the social (multilingual) setting where Francophone authors evolve, but in literature as well. For Francophone authors, writing in French does not obliterate the reality of all the other languages they speak. More often than not, they resort to various mechanisms whereby to take charge of the language issue in their works. From indigenizing the authorial French to incorporating local xenisms¹⁸ through allusions to oral literature, the strategies of detours are plenty in Francophone texts as French-speaking authors manage their “surconscience linguistique.” With Francophone authors, what was once deemed a desecration of French is now cultivated and even celebrated as a sign of strength, diversity and identity. These features of plurilingualism are indeed used to account for the true heterogeneous nature of the novel in general, and the African Europhone one in particular. In fact, the use of French alongside local languages in Francophone literature does not simply bear witness to the necessity of language change; it is a deliberate effort from these French-speaking (plurilingual) authors to validate and bring exposure to the different cultural spaces each language in their narratives points to. Language then becomes, for Francophone authors, a site of contestation.

3- What Is Next for La Francophonie and Francophone Literature?

Despite the many, oftentimes contradictory definitions of the term, one thing remains: the origins of La Francophonie will forever be tied to the history of France and its colonial empire. Today, more than half a century after the majority of ex-French colonies gained independence, the French language and culture are still being used and promoted beyond France’s hexagonal confines. Francophone writers face the rather antagonistic task of expressing themselves in the same hegemonic language used for assimilation purposes. By using the French language as a practical tool through which they articulate their differences and their identities, Francophone authors turn La Francophonie, an ambiguous concept, into a space where diversity is celebrated. And at the heart of this “decolonizing” project is the very same language used for hegemonic purposes, a language heavily guarded by the French Academy. While it’s undeniable that being Francophone inherently entails a commitment to a shared allegiance to the French language, as described by Maurice Druon, it’s equally valid to assert that this language is not monolithic. Rather, it encompasses a diverse spectrum of cultural and linguistic nuances reflective of the various nations comprising La Francophonie.

¹⁸ Xenisms are linguistic terms taken from one language and used in another without translation or significant modification. Xenisms are often used to convey concepts that may not have a direct equivalent in the borrowing language.

Unlike ideologies advocated by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986), within the French colonial empire, there wasn’t always a distinct parallelism between language and culture. Consequently, the wars of liberation within Francophone territories didn’t necessarily target the French language in the same manner as in Anglophone regions. In 1966, Senghor famously contended that “la décolonisation culturelle de l’Afrique francophone ne devait en aucun cas passer par une remise en question de la langue française, considérée comme intrinsèquement émancipatrice” (qtd in Mollier 160).¹⁹ While some critics will disagree with the liberating value that Senghor bestowed on the French language, it wasn’t until later however, with the publication of seminal works such as *Orientalism* (1978) and *Invention of Africa* (1988), that we witnessed the early wave of African Francophone writers openly and loudly take aim at monoglossic Franco-French and classical versification codes of the French language. Regardless of how La Francophonie is defined—from a linguistic, geographical, political or even ideological point of view—one thing always remains constant: the organization/concept has at its core the French language itself. In the words of Djemal Elabe, a former Minister of education from Djibouti, in Francophonie, “[la] frontière c’est la langue française” (qtd in Deniau 39).²⁰

Today, the configuration of cultural spaces created by means of the French language is still evolving and the different cartographies of La Francophonie still do not necessarily map onto each other. In its publication dated March 16, 2007 in *Le Monde*, a group of forty-four writers of French expression from the Maghreb, Africa, France itself and the West Indies (among other locations), wrote a manifesto in defence of a world literature in French entitled “Pour une ‘littérature monde’ en français.” In it they proclaim the death of Francophone literature, a concept they view as perpetrating a colonizer/colonized divide. By playing down the ideological underpinning inherent in Francophone literature, Michel LeBris and allies seek to do away with the historical and political power relations that once existed (and still exist?) between France and its former colonies.

Though the institution of La Francophonie comprises members who never were part of the French colonial empire, it remains nonetheless that its once imperial and hegemonic conception of the French language and culture as superior and universal seems still to be carried out within the institution. More than the rhetorical claims of “dialogue des cultures,” by using and promoting a single language, La Francophonie, whether willingly or not, presents linguistic identity as homogeneous, overlooking the obvious multilingual reality of the populations that make up the institution.

¹⁹ Cultural decolonization in Africa should not necessarily take aims at the French language; a language fundamentally liberating (translation mine).

²⁰ “The border is the French language” (translation mine).

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