Review


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Reviewed by Huw Rees

This work addresses the status of French in the modern age and looks forward to the future of one of the world’s major languages. Under examination are the influence of numerous factors including globalisation, the changing face of Europe and the impact of modern technology. The writers explain the motivation behind this new addition to field: ‘L’Avenir du français is aimed at those making political, economic and social decisions, bringing to light information necessary for their decision making. These same qualities make this work key reading for Francophones all over the world who are both worried and fascinated by the great linguistic questions of the day’ (p. 4). The contributors come from a wide range of linguistic and professional backgrounds each giving a synopsis of a specific facet of the current or future status of French.

The first section of the book is entitled ‘L’état des lieux’ and explores the current state of the French language painting a depressing picture for the Francophone community which shows English dominating numerous and disparate aspects of modern life from academia to international politics. This chapter opens with a brief history of the expansion of French as a language through history and moves on to explore the use of French in large interna-

Affiliation

Birkbeck College, University of London, UK.
email: huwrees79@hotmail.com
tional organisations such as the European Union and various African political institutions.

Two chapters from this section of particular significance to those interested in the place of French in the modern world are those dealing with French in the light of globalisation and the new technological era. Some prescient points are made here regarding the fact that language use can no longer be analysed on a purely geographical basis since the invention of cyberspace. Clear empirical evidence is provided here showing the changes in linguistic dominance of the internet.

The book moves on to tackle the economic and political power of French by linking language to certain economic figures such as gross national product and providing empirical data on the use of French within large political institutions. This is followed by a chapter looking at the role of French in linguistic and cultural diversity.

The central chapters of this section examine the place of the French language in the workplace in the face of globalisation. This is a fascinating section which shows the impact of economic decisions on language use and investigates the determining factors in the use of language in the workplace which include technology, immigration, social factors and the impact of clients and suppliers. Much is written about the social and political determinants behind language choice and these chapters will be a breath of fresh air to those keen to examine links between economic prosperity and language usage which will surely come to prominence in the coming decades of increased globalisation.

‘French and the young: the modernising of French’ is the title of the next chapter with a multitude of contributors describing different topics from the evolution of French amongst the youth in Cameroon to school language choice as an indicator of linguistic vitality.

The closing chapters of this section turn their spotlight on the use of French in the world of the social, human and natural sciences. This section tackles the dominance of the English language in the world of scientific research, where the vast majority of information is in English, and charts the reduction in the usage of French in this field. The writers suggest ways forward for promoting the use of French in the field and encourage language education in conjunction with science as well as encouraging the translation of materials into both English and French.

Overall this section is excellent and provides a thorough overview of the place of French in the modern world from which the authors can build their view of the future. The only drawback is that certain topics are revisited from different angles at different junctures leaving the reader with a slight feeling of déjà vu, although one could conceivably argue that this is inevitable when tackling such a subject as language usage in the contemporary world.
The second section of the book centres on the teaching of French in various locations around the world and takes in a broad geographical scope. Different national varieties of French are discussed before moving on to the teaching of French in Africa. One positive move taken in this region in evidence here is the outlining of workshops undertaken between French speaking African countries where decisions were made to tackle the priorities of teaching in that region and endeavour to make teaching more professional. The ensuing chapters scrutinize the teaching of French as a foreign language and the need to improve both teaching and teaching resources for the instruction of French globally. The authors chart the shift in language teaching paradigms in the 1960s and 1970s from a grammar based approach to a more communicative approach, and move on to examine how best to move language teaching forward in the future. One drawback here is that recommendations for future changes to the teaching of French are made without providing examples of where these steps have had an impact on the development of other languages around the world, and if this were not possible the recommendations need further clarification as to why they have been made and what impact it is felt they will have.

The modernisation of the French language is the subject of the third section of the book which focuses on the adaptation of the corpus to modern day concerns. Both common usage and specialised usage are examined here and the work outlines some reassuring steps that have been taken to ensure that French is able to adapt to technological changes which are seen as vital to the future of the language. Other interesting points are made regarding the historical view of French as a language of art, culture and high society and questioning whether this antiquated view of the language is still relevant in the technological and commercial age we now live in.

The final section of the book tackles the prospects for the future of French. The opening chapters attempt the Orwellian feat of predicting future population changes and how these might affect the Francophone world. The subsequent chapters explore the future of French in an evolving Europe and in North America. Canada and its surrounding areas are covered in detail, but one may ask why the United States of America is allocated only one paragraph, less than is dedicated to New Brunswick or smaller locations such as New Zealand and the tiny, remote island of Vanuatu. Notwithstanding the dominance of English and Spanish in the USA, why is this enormous market for L2 learners not scrutinised in more detail and at the very least given its own chapter? Now that the Bush era has come to a close has the United States of America ever been more open to the world, and therefore the world’s languages? Despite the immense detail of this section and the rigorous empirical evidence provided for numerous geographical outposts it could be argued that this was an opportunity to evaluate the prospects of French in the world’s most powerful nation. The
book earlier stated the important link between language and economics and yet only one paragraph is dedicated to the prevalence of French in China, the world’s fastest growing economy. Again one feels this is an opportunity lost to investigate the role French as an L2 could have in building economic and social bridges between France, Africa and the wider Francophone world.

A chapter of particular note is that exploring French in Oceania. This chapter covers a wide geographical and linguistic scope with ease and clearly presents future opportunities for the expansion of French and the reasons why this area is fertile for French to grow.

The closing chapters examine how other languages, such as English, Russian and Spanish, view the future of French and the book concludes with propositions for the future of French and a philosophical reflection on how the francophone world could best secure a healthy future for their language.

This is an excellent book which sets out a clear purpose and achieves it with great success. The writers are hamstrung somewhat by the aim, outlined in the introduction, to avoid specialised linguistic terminology in order to make the book accessible to non-specialists, but handle this restriction admirably. The obvious strengths of the book are its clarity, use of empirical data to highlight linguistic trends and the vast scope of authors from disparate backgrounds used to give a comprehensive picture of the current and future state of the French language.