

# Multilingual Capability Is Essential In The Global Science Community

By Eugene Garfield

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It was disappointing to learn that linguistic chauvinism has reared its head once again in the form of a law proposed several months ago by Jacques Toubon, France's Minister of Culture. Ostensibly, the measure promoted the purity of the French language. Among its sillier provisions, the law banned in official communications thousands of words such as "weekend" that are in common use throughout France, but are not etymologically home-grown.

Not so silly in its implications is the suppressive spirit of the law, an irony in a nation so traditionally identified with democracy and the "Rights of Man."

Particularly galling (no pun intended) was another of the law's implications, which--if the statute had remained in effect--would require all scientific papers based on publicly funded research to be published in French. Considering my past involvement with this matter, I was pleased when France's Constitutional Council overturned the law (which had, in fact, been passed by the French legislature) on grounds that it would infringe on individual rights.

Toubon's hobbyhorse, if set to rocking, would have been a sorry expression of nationalistic fervor likely to be (a) unenforceable, (b)

an embarrassing revelation of France's inability to integrate itself maturely into today's global community, and (c) a heavy setback regarding that nation's pursuits in the international science community.

Actually, my annoyance with the likes of Toubon goes back more than a quarter-century. In the 1960s, when the Institute for Scientific Information was launching the Science Citation Index and I was explaining the concept to researchers around the world, I frequently lectured in France. I couldn't help feeling uncomfortable with the frowning faces I saw when I mispronounced a word or botched an idiomatic expression. In responding to questions, I usually relied on a translation provided by an obliging French colleague, to make certain I had grasped all of the colloquial nuances.

In the 1970s, I perceived a change taking place: Questions from my French audiences were increasingly asked in English, and my colleagues--still impatient with my fractured French--suggested that I present my lectures in English. I developed my own hands-across-the-sea device, beginning lectures with brief introductions in French, then continuing in English. Not only was I understood, but also it became apparent that, in France as elsewhere, the common language of the international

science community had become English, as I noted in an essay titled "The English Language: The Lingua Franca Of International Science" (*The Scientist*, May 15, 1989, page 12).

I've addressed this subject frequently over the years, occasionally stirring up a bit of controversy. Seventeen years ago, in a two-part Current Contents essay ("Le Nouveau Defi Americain," *Essays of an Information Scientist*, Philadelphia, ISI Press, Vol. 3, pages 88-102, 1977-78), I reported on the reaction of Michel Debre, former Prime Minister of France, to an article I had published the year before in the French journal *La Recherche*. In the article, I had suggested that French science--in part owing to linguistic nationalism--was too provincial and that its researchers should publish in English. Debre claimed that my suggestion posed a threat to French tradition "from which people could not recover" and warned that "a nationalist revolt" might ensue "if we follow Garfield" (*La Recherche*, 7:956, 1976).

Well, the passage of time has proved Debre wrong. I took great pleasure in the French Academy of Sciences' decision to publish not only an English contents page, but also extended resumes in its *Comptes Rendus*; likewise my reaction to the routine inclusion of English texts in the journals of the Institut Pasteur. The academy, the institute, and French publishers such as Gauthier-Villars realize that survival in the international science arena is directly linked to their publishing in English. (One might only

speculate on the outcome of the Montaigner-Gallo dispute had Montaigner and his colleagues published their important studies in French-language journals exclusively.)

For Jacques Toubon and other Francophiles who still cling to their misguided linguistic dreams, I must repeat a challenge I made almost 20 years ago:

The French language will not decline because French scientists publish in English--as long as French mothers and fathers continue to speak French to their children (even if they grow up to become scientists). But in order to become significant players in the international science arena, French scientists cannot refuse to learn English. Neither France nor the French language will ever suffer for having encouraged the development of a strong cadre of internationally recognized multilingual scientists.

Moreover, the need for multilingual capability is not limited to the French. The pursuit of familiarity with, if not fluency in, languages other than one's own should be fundamental in the education of anyone hoping to participate effectively in the modern research world. For reasons that the French should understand very well, I urge American parents to introduce children to other languages as part of the cultural development they will need in order to succeed and fully enjoy careers in the global economy.

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