Communication Versus Prestige: A Balanced Approach to French-Language Anglicisms

By Julia Shriver

https://commons.wikimedia.org
L’Académie française

• Organization French government created in 1635
• 40 peer-elected members (Immortels) from a variety backgrounds
• Mission as stated in Article 24: « La principale fonction de l’Académie sera de travailler, avec tout le soin et toute la diligence possibles, à donner des règles certaines à notre langue et à la rendre pure, éloquente et capable de traiter les arts et les sciences.
  • My translation: The principle function of the Academy will be to work with all possible care and diligence to give our language definitive rules and to make it pure, eloquent, and capable of handling the arts and sciences.
Principle Duties

• Sets standards for permitted grammar and vocabulary

• Adds new words and definitions to words in *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* in response to language’s evolution published 1694 (most recent edition: 1935)

• Supports arts and sciences through 70 annual literary awards, and through scholarships and subsidies

• English’s role: l’Académie increasingly has worked to fight against Anglicism use
Semantic Advantages of Anglicism Use

• Succinct communication
  • English word or phrase may express idea most succinctly
  • French equivalent often longer (possessive, fewer compound phrases/words)

• Communication of ideas/concepts unavailable or hard to describe in French terms
  • Ben-Rafael (2008) in his study of French comics concluded English terms can “[designate] new realities which are not easily described by the existing French lexicon,” particularly human and physical geographical terms
Examples of Anglicisms Worthy of Consideration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anglicism</th>
<th>Académie’s Alternative</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High-tech</td>
<td>Du matériel de haute technologie</td>
<td>Of material of high technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoiler</td>
<td>Ne gâchez pas le plaisir / Ne me racontez rien !</td>
<td>Don’t ruin the fun/Don’t tell me anything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacklister (v.)/backlisté (adj.)</td>
<td>Figurer sur une liste noire /être écarté parce que l’on est sur une liste noire</td>
<td>Appear on a blacklist/be isolated (pushed aside) because you’re on a blacklist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Words for which l’académie française proposes no alternative: burn-out, buzz, dress code, show off…
Cultural Advantages to Anglicisms

- Apter’s (2011) “translation zone”
- Connects French people to global English-speaking world
- Educates French people on culture other than their own
- Incorporating Anglicisms can give works of literature local color
A Caveat: the Danger of English Dominance

- English has become global superpower warranting some resistance
- In France, sounding “English” has become symbol of education and high social status
- Less widely spoken languages like French run risk of dying out
Danger of Draconian Control On Part of l’Académie

- L’Académie resembles monarchy over French language
- Resists against natural evolution of language
  - Ben-Rafael: “significant gap” between l’Académie’s attitude and “linguistic behaviors of speakers” (n.p.)
- Restricts French public’s free speech
Conclusion

• All about balance!

• L’Académie should allow some level of Anglicism use that
  • Protects French language
  • Respects free speech and natural evolution of language
  • Allow for effective communication of ideas

• As this course has debated all semester:
  • Is English a world tool or a world problem?
  • My answer: a little bit of both

https://commons.wikimedia.org


