

Sharing and caring for French

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The Francosphere is the fastest growing language zone in the world, with over one billion people expected to be living in French-speaking countries by 2065, second only to countries that speak English. What are the challenges for this francophonie – and for the world?

“For liberty to live, men will always have to stand up and fight against indifference and resignation.” In 1776, America was fighting for its freedom. The 21-year old Marquis de La Fayette volunteered to defend this cause and, with the backing of Louis XVI, set sail on the Hermione to provide French assistance to the fledgling America.

Since then, the Hermione has become a symbol of solidarity and freedom. In 2018, the replica of the Hermione is keeping this solidarity afloat, with the International

Organisation of La Francophonie at the helm of an exciting, harmonious and forward-looking adventure.

The Francosphere covers 274 million French speakers over five continents. French is the second most widely learned language after English. In November 2017, Emmanuel Macron said that French could be “the number one language in Africa and maybe even the world”. As he pointed out, the centre of gravity of the French language was “somewhere between Kinshasa and Brazzaville rather than between Paris and Montauban”. The influence of French has now shifted beyond France and is unfolding in Africa.

This expansion will naturally depend on further progress in school enrolment and the teaching of French in African countries, but the figures speak for themselves. According to the UN, the Francosphere is the fastest growing language zone in the world, forecast to increase by 143% between 2015 and 2065 (compared to 62% for English), by which time a billion people are expected to be speaking French. This would make it the second international language, behind English. ([Libération](#))

The challenges facing the Francosphere, which reaches worldwide, are therefore essential for the future of humanity. French can be used to facilitate cultural and economic integration, allowing people to live together and be free together. The International Organisation of La Francophonie wants an open and united Francosphere. It also wants an active Francosphere, working to develop linguistic and cultural diversity, the economy, and entrepreneurship, training, sustainable development, prospects for young people, for women, etc.

Life together is something that 350 crew members from around the world are experiencing on the *Hermione*. The origins of these topmen are very diverse, covering 34 member states and governments from La Francophonie, from Haiti to Vietnam via Mali. The ten-day crossing from Rochefort to Tangier has cemented their team spirit.

Off the coast of Portugal, the wind rose and the boat rolled more than 40 degrees. The topmen were all out at night, working as equals. Secure in their harnesses, they busied themselves furling the sails to prevent the boat capsizing. On deck, everyone looked out for their neighbour. They pushed themselves, physically and mentally. They overcame their fears and worked as one.

I think of Soulo, the unforgettable journalist from Mali, who had never seen the sea before or “even sailed in a canoe on the river Niger”, as he explained with a laugh. But there he was, braving the elements despite constant seasickness. The other topmen helped him keep his spirits up, especially Jimmy, the warm-hearted son of Cambodian refugees from Quebec.

Jimmy talked about his fellow travellers, about all the people he had met – like Levinas’ encounter with the Other –, about what they told him about their lives,

and their desires. Jimmy expected nothing in return and just listened, unassumingly.

Jimmy likened French to sailing, as something which achieved its full potential during moments of exchange. French was the deck of the boat, where everyone stood together. He talked about words carried on the winds. He made me think of Saint-John Perse, who wrote, “These were very great winds over all the faces of this world, Very great winds rejoicing over the world, (...) Having neither care nor caution, and leaving us, men of straw (...) And my opinion is that we should live! With the torch in the wind, with the flame in the wind, And that all men amongst us should be so mingled and consumed therein, That this growing torch may kindle within us a greater clarity...”

Jimmy ferried these words, harbouring the French language which travels across five continents, restlessly roaming and reinventing itself across a spectrum of diversity and liberty, from Kinshasa to Quebec. There are similarities with Amin Maalouf’s idea in “In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong” that the multiple nature of our identities is what makes them so rich.

“Neither language nor the sun will stop nowadays. The day when they become ‘fixed’, they’re dead” (Victor Hugo). Montaigne would cast a bemused eye over the language for which he bravely eschewed Latin as now, over five centuries later, it is as fresh as a daisy. Senghor’s “old lady in hat and gloves” now raps around the world about being “[Free Together](#)”. French is a language of desire, according to the [Leila Slimani](#). You can decide to live it and experience it, like Beckett, Kundera and Makine. Like the 120 000 Chinese and 500 000 Indians currently learning French.

In Tangier, where the Hermione docked not long before the start of spring, French, Arabic and Spanish coexist. Tangier, a fabled, beautiful and living city feted in all these three languages, and many more, by Tahar Ben Jelloun, Mohamed Choukri and Juan Goytisolo, to name just a very few. Tangier, a city built on the winds and a meeting point between Africa and Europe, the South and the North, the East and the West, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. A city whose huge port, Tanger-Med, is a window to the world.

In Tangier, Jimmy talked about what was right—and wrong—with the world, about inequalities and life paths. About being born somewhere, as Maxime Le Forestier sang. About giving everyone the same opportunities, whether they are from Tangier, Algiers, Paris or Manila. But how?

Jimmy talked about the importance for all countries of the economy and development. He was looking for a well-informed and concrete approach. He was interested in the OECD’s, with its international dimension and comparative approach. The OECD wants to turn words into actions, fight inequalities, and promote initiatives for better lives. And to do so it uses dialogue, collective

thinking, international co-operation and action. In French, in English (the two official languages of the OECD), and in many other languages.

But just when we are most in need of international co-operation, it seems that fear, suspicion, and the temptation to turn inwards are gaining ground. In an interdependent world, a multilateral approach is nonetheless essential. Without international co-operation, there is no chance of overcoming the complex issues surrounding the themes of inequality, sustainable development, climate change, digitisation, taxation and migration.

We need to work together.

Like the crew on a worldwide Hermione.

All hands on deck.

References

Francophonie <https://www.francophonie.org/>

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/LHERMIONESHIP/>

OECD Forum <http://www.oecd.org/forum/>