Introduction: French – an affair of state

Presidents Charles De Gaulle, Georges Pompidou, François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac were all greatly interested, but in rather special ways, in matters affecting the French language. De Gaulle set up the *Haut Comité de la Langue Française* in plush offices under the Prime Minister and charged it in 1966 with overseeing the ‘defence’ and the ‘expansion’ of the language, in France and abroad. Pompidou made sure that things happened in language matters – the ministerial circular at last giving effect to the 1951 Deixonne law on regional languages saw the light of day in 1969; the *Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique*, supporting international ‘Francophonie’, was created in 1970, even though much of the push for this came from Quebec; terminology commissions, agreeing the French versions of American terms which are then made legally binding in official documents and in the industry, were set up in specific ministries as from 1970; the Bas-Lauriol law, protecting the consumer from the non-use of French, even though it formally dates from 1975, was set in motion while Pompidou was still alive. Under Mitterrand, the *Haut Comité* and associated government language organizations were reorganized in 1984 and again in 1989; international summit meetings of French-speaking countries eventually started in 1986 and have taken place every two years since. Even though the Toubon Act of 1994 actually got on the statute book under Prime Minister Edouard Balladur and before Chirac won the 1995 Presidentials, since becoming President Chirac has retained many of the language agencies and reinforced the ‘Francophonie’ summit meetings.
Contemporary French language policy

Many 'Anglo-Saxon' commentators find this level of interest and all this policy activity amazing. What on earth have the Presidency and the Prime Minister's office got to do with language? Why do the French set up a 'Ministry of Purity', fine the Body Shop for selling goods labelled in English, or the Metz-based branch of the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta for using English on its Web site? What link is there between such petty matters (the fines are only £130 or so) and the major purposes of the State? French language policy on the eve of the new millennium has three clearly defined objectives: 'assurer la présence et le rayonnement du français, langue de la République; conserver au français son rôle de langue de communication internationale; préserver la diversité culturelle et linguistique dans le monde par la promotion du plurilinguisme'.

The 'défense' and 'expansion' of the early Gaullist policy have been modified over the years to become 'présence' and 'rayonnement', while the second and third aims, expressed in rather defeatist terms as 'conserver' and 'préserver', represent a sharper focus and an awareness of the existence of other languages which had not been present in any earlier formulation. Within France, the aim is to reinforce the status and prestige of French as the official language and to make sure it is used everywhere. Its spread is to be encouraged not only within but also outside France. Preserving its role as a language of international communication, although seemingly aimed at international activities such as trade or diplomacy, is in fact also aimed at the many international bodies ranging from the United Nations and the European Council to the Olympic Games, many of which are tempted to adopt one language only as the easiest way of communicating with their many members. The protection of the world's cultural and linguistic diversity seems at first sight a rather strange aim in a policy for French: but the purpose is as much negative as positive, and the phrase also hides an attack on English, or rather American, influence, seen as promoting globalization and monoculturalism.

Legislating for French

Ensuring that French is widely used and its use encouraged is not merely symbolic policy: it has led to specific recent legislation 'with teeth'. Nor is the policy something of little or no wider