During the Great War, the French army deployed some 500,000 colonial subjects as soldiers on the Western Front. Known as *troupes indigènes*, these men came from across France’s worldwide empire, with North and West Africa, Indochina and Madagascar providing the largest contingents. Of course, these men did not speak French as their native language, and in fact the vast majority of them spoke little or no French upon their induction. This presented the army with a serious problem. Language barriers and misunderstandings could be inconvenient during training, and could be lethal in combat. Moreover, language had a tremendous importance in French culture, an importance that carried over into the colonial arena in a particular way. Republican colonial ideology held that educating *indigènes*, particularly in the use of the French language, was part of France’s ‘civilizing mission’ to uplift subject populations. As official French propaganda put it during the war, referring directly to soldiers from the colonies, ‘knowing better our language, the sentiments which unite us will only be strengthened’. Language, then, played a key role both in practical terms, communicating in the ranks, and on a broader ideological and cultural level, uniting France and its colonial subjects in a common national struggle for survival in the face of German aggression.

One obvious solution to language barriers in the ranks was to find a common language for troops and officers alike. Before the war, the preferred solution was for French officers and non-commissioned officers to learn the language of their men. In 1909, Major Auguste Bonifacy, an influential voice in army circles in Indochina for both his military expertise and his status as a prolific author of anthropological studies of the
peoples of the colony, told his colleagues that ‘Our officers, especially those who are in direct contact with the [Indochinese] soldier, must know his language, his character, his prejudices, and his traditions.’ In knowing the native language, French commanders would understand the native ‘mentality’ (Bonifacy 1909: 1–3). This ideal remained important in the army through the war and into the post-war years. In a foreword to an Arabic language manual for French officers published in 1934, one of France’s most famous leaders of the Great War, Marshal Louis Franchet d’Esperey, noted that the Ministry of War had recognized the importance of language training when it had ordered in 1919 that all military schools in France teach spoken Arabic. He echoed Bonifacy’s earlier comments, noting that training in Arabic was essential for officers to communicate directly with soldiers under their command, to carry out the critical task of ‘monitor[ing] closely the existence of their men’. The moral importance of language was clear: ‘There is no connection among men who are called to live, to struggle, and even to die together comparable to a common language’ (Ammar 1934: iii–iv).

Yet another obvious solution was to teach troupes indigènes French, and this was more consistent with the French colonial ‘civilizing mission’. A 1928 manual for teaching spoken French to soldiers from the colonies approached the issue from the practical point of view, noting that the presence of troupes indigènes in units throughout the army necessitated French instruction. This presence was the legacy of the extensive recruitment in the colonies undertaken between 1914 and 1918, and this post-war publication followed closely ideals expressed during that earlier period. The manual made clear the broader colonial and cultural goal by embedding the ideological message in the instruction itself. One lesson called attention to the flag flying above the barracks: ‘Above the door there is a flag. It is the French flag. One must love the flag and salute it. It represents our country: France’ (Caussin 1928: 17). Thus the lesson embodied the notion that by serving in the French army, colonial subjects were entering into the French nation, ‘our country’, uniting with it in spirit and in fact.

But a number of practical problems stood in the way of teaching French to these men, especially during the war. First of all, if the author of the 1928 manual admitted that the time for language instruction during peacetime duty was ‘relatively limited’, how much more limited was time during the sustained emergency of the four years of the Great War, when hundreds of thousands of new recruits, many of them from rural areas and uneducated in any language, flowed into the army throughout the empire (Caussin 1928: 4)? Some even disputed the wisdom and