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Computer experts and computer terminology in France: is terminological planning having any impact?

Language planning and policy measures are generally concerned with either the status or prestige of a language or with the corpus of a language (its spelling, its terminology, etc.). This commonly accepted distinction between status planning and corpus planning was first introduced by Heinz Kloss in 1969 (Calvet, 1996:17). In France terminological planning is an important aspect of corpus planning. It involves eighteen specialized commissions on terminology (Commissions spécialisée de terminologie et de néologie) and one general commission on terminology (Commission générale de terminologie et de néologie[1]). Every specialized commission is attached to a ministry and is mainly responsible for making an inventory of lexical gaps in varied fields (agriculture, defence, telecommunications, tourism, sport, advertising, computer technology etc.) and for proposing new terms to designate new concepts or to replace 'unnecessary' loan words. Terminological recommendations are made to the general commission on terminology which is assigned the task to supervize and harmonize the work of the commissions as well as to make terminological recommendations in areas not covered by the eighteen other commissions. Since the adoption of the decree of July 31, 1996 all terminological recommendations have had to be approved by the French Academy (Académie Française) before they may appear in the governmental publication (Journal Officiel). Reporting to the Ministry of culture the General Delegation of the French Language (Délégation générale à la langue française) founded in 1989 has the mandate to coordinate the commissions and to publish their work in form of reports, glossaries etc.

On August 4, 1994, the French government passed a law which soon became famous as the Toubon law named after Jacques Toubon, the Minister of Culture and Francophonie of the time. This law which mainly aimed at boosting French as a language of international status was another step in France's long history of governmental interest and decision taking in language matters. In an earlier version the law contained a clause prohibiting the use of terms and expressions in a foreign language "whenever French equivalents are available". This clause was later abrogated when France's Constitutional Council ruled that it infringed the individual right of freedom of expression. While no mention is made to the commissions on terminology in the final version of the Toubon Law, documents (circulaires) sent to ministries regarding measures to be taken to enforce the law contained a 'recommendation' to public servants to use the terms proposed by the commissions. Such a recommendation which was strongly backing the work of the commissions was clearly directed against the use of English terms and expressions mainly in scientific and technological domains. In many documents explicit reference is made to the dictionary (Dictionnaire des termes officiels) published in January 1994 by the Délégation générale à la langue française to promote all the new French terms which were approved over a period of about 20 years[2] .

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[1]Before the adoption of the decree of July 3, 1996, these commissions were referred to as commissions de terminologie and commission générale de terminologie.

[2]The first terminological decree (Arreté de terminologie) dates back from January 12, 1973.

Few studies have been concerned with the impact of terminological decisions. In 1992-1993 the *Délégation générale à la langue française* commissioned one study on the use of the 'official' terminology in the field of genetic engineering (Guespin and Gaudin, 1993). In 1995 a few independent studies were published which looked at the use of official terms in the areas of nuclear research and telematics (Gaudin,1995). As for computer terminology, no study has looked at the impact of the work of the commission on computer terminology which was the first commission to be set up (in 1970). In more than 20 years some of the French terms recommended by the commission have painlessly replaced their English equivalents. For instance, what computer users referred to as 'software' or 'soft' 15 years ago has become 'logiciel', 'hardware' and 'mouse' are now 'matériel' and 'souris' respectively. Despite these positive signs of a trend towards a greater use of French terms, computer terminology is still considered 'English-sensitive' (DGLF, 1997,2) and it is not clear to which extent the work of the commission is shaping up the 'terminological preferences' of computer users. The following study constitutes an attempt to assess the impact of terminological planning on computer users.

Description of Study

This study is aiming at finding answers to a certain number of questions relative to the 'concrete' as well as to the 'ideological' impact of terminological decisions on computer users. Do computer experts are familiar with and/or use the terms recommended by the commission on computer terminology? do they approve the mandate of the commission? what do they think of France's language planning policies? The study was conducted more than a year and a half after the passing of the Toubon Law (1996). It was intended for public servants as well as computer users employed in private companies. Surveying public employees was important considering the fact that the language planning measures are first directed towards public servants. To quote a document[3] which outlined the responsibilities of public employees with respect to the *Toubon Law,* "public servants, more than any other citizens, have the duty to promote the correct use of the (French) language". It also seemed important to survey private employees in order to give the study a comparative dimension.

Methodology

Questionnaires were sent to computer users working in public institutions and private companies in four French cities (Paris, Marseille, Nice and Strasbourg). All the surveyed public servants were working in the division of computer technology at the Ministry of Defence in Paris or in one of the Ministry's offices in Marseille and Strasbourg. Sixty of the eighty questionnaires were returned by engineers, computer programmers, secretaries, project managers, senior managers, etc. According to the answers provided for question 1[4], all informants use a computer at work "frequently", "very frequently" or "always". The questionnaire written in French counts fourteen questions. Some of them being divided into related questions, the total number of questions is actually twenty-eight. Some questions call for a yes/no answer; others for a coded answer. As most questions sollicited comments and/or

[3]Circulaire of April 12, 1994 relative to the use of the French language by public servants.

[4]**Question 1** How often do you use the computer at work: a. Very frequently/ always b. Rather frequently c. Sometimes d. Seldom/ never

explanations, informants'responses contained very detailed and relevant remarks which we found extremely useful for the purpose of the study. We will quote some of the remarks.[5]

The questions presented in a random fashion cover five aspects:
- the informant's attitudes to France's terminological planning in the area of computer technology;
- his/her familiarity with sixty French terms recommended by the commission on computer terminology;
- his/her knowledge of the English equivalents of some of the sixty given French terms;
- the informant's terminological sources: does he/she read magazines, glossaries, dictionaries, official documents etc;
- the informant's assessment of some French terms proposed by the commission.

A Summary of the Results of The Survey

Questions 6, 7 and 8 are focusing on the first aspect. Surprisingly enough responses to question 6[6] indicate that only 37.5% of the informants are aware of the existence of a commission on computer terminology. When asked to assess the role of the commission on terminology (question 8[7]), 22.5% (against 30%) agree that 'it is absolutely necessary and that it will eventually have a positive impact' and 45% (against 20%) think that 'it is necessary but computer experts are unlikely to use the official French terms'. 45% (against 18.8%) also think that the work of the commission ' is useful but not necessary'. On the other hand 20% (against 32.5%) agree that it is 'useless because no one will ever know nor use the terms recommended by the commission' and 17.5% (against 35%) agree that it is 'useless because computer experts prefer using English terms. Figures show that the informants' assessment is rather moderate with a preference for statements 2 and 3 but no overall strong support of any statement. This trend seems to be in tune with results of question 6 which are not suggesting an overwhelming response in favour of the use of French terms. Indeed 60% of informants think that 'it is important to use the French term -when it is available- rather that the English equivalent' and 40% disagree. The informants' comments -which are very long and detailed- help to understand the figures. Most informants provide comments that we would describe as 'yes but..' or 'no but..' arguments. Arguments in favour of the use of French terms often rely on more general arguments made in the sake of "the respect of the French language", "the protection of the French culture and language" or "the importance of fighting against a scientific monolingualism". Some arguments in favour of the use of French terms are simply dictated by practical considerations. "Using French would improve the dialogue between experts and non experts," one informant (22) writes; "our customers prefer that we use French," comments another (31). On the other hand many respondents who agree in principle on the importance of promoting the use of French still

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[5] For the purpose of this paper I have translated some of the questions and informants'comments/ remarks into English.

[6] **Question 7.** Do you know that there is a commision on computer terminology? Yes/No.

[7] **Question 8.** The main mandate of the commission on computer terminology is to promote the use of French among computer experts by providing them with a French computer terminology to replace the English one. What do you think of the mandate of the commission? -Informants were presented with five statements and were to answer yes no to one or more statement.

express a reservation towards the French terms proposed by the commission on computer terminology. They argue that those terms are often "bad" "funny" or "not natural" translations: "Better the original term than a bad translation," writes the top manager of a software company (26). Examples of what most informants regard are "bad translations" are provided by question 14. Asked to identify the most adequate equivalent of each of four English terms among a short list of terms -one of them being the 'official' recommendation - , most informants reject the translation *numéro d'urgence* (emergency number) for 'hot line' and recommend the expression *assistance téléphonique* ('help line') which, as many suggest, is commonly used by computer experts. Same issue for the word 'joystick' which the commission translates as *manche à balai* ('broomstick') while most informants prefer *manette* ('handle'). Results of questions 10 and 11[8] are also suggesting that many of the 60 French terms presented are not very familiar or when they are, they do not seem to be frequently used. Among the least popular official terms one can find the word *bogue* ('husk') which the commission recommends for 'bug' whereas the words 'bug' or *vermine* ('vermin') are used by most computer users. The loan translation *système propriétaire* (proprietary system) is also overwhelmingly preferred to the 'official' *système exclusif* ('exclusive system). The term *listage* is known but the English term 'listing' is more commonly used. The meaning of the expression *tel écran-tel écrit* is guessed whereas the acronym WYSIWYG is familiar to most and used by most. A few informants write that "the French terms do not always have the same meaning as the English equivalents" and are therefore less or not used. As for them the French terms are too "general" wheras the English ones are very "precise". It is interesting to note that the English language is often qualified as "precise","scientific","more technical" and "useful". A few other respondents argue against an absolute need for French terms in computer terminology on the basis of the general idea that computer experts are used to hearing, reading, using English terms: "Most of the terms in the field are English terms and they are known to the professionals as such" (6); "Computer experts use English terms and undestand each other very well" (36). One informant suggests that manuals delivered with hardware or software are often written in English. According to another informant the computer users' terminological 'behaviour' mostly depends on the "culture" of the institution where experts are working. In this context "culture" should be understood as the environment and the way this environment shapes habits. For most computer experts, using the official French terms is not as much a priority as using a terminology their peers will understand. Although public servants appear to be more sensitive to the language issue and to have an easier access to 'official' publications, they are still, like most computer users, rather reluctant to change their linguistic habits in order to help promoting the French language. Moreover, in a computer expert's world, oral communication plays a crucial role. Computer experts in ministries or private enterprises often work in teams on very specific tasks. The team members are the people you discuss ideas with, resolve problems with. As question 4 shows, team members are often consulted for the meaning of a new term which is less time consuming than looking the word up in a dictionary or in a specialized magazine. Dictionaries are not privileged terminological sources although they seem to be more in fashion than specialized magazines.

In conclusion this survey is suggesting that the commission on computer terminology has not had, in more than 20 years, a very clear perception of the computer experts'

[8]**Questions 10** and **11** present 30 terms each (all of them being 'official' terms listed in the *Dictionnaire des termes officiels*). Informants are asked to use codes to say if they know and/or could define the term; if they use the term (never or almost never/ rather frequently/ very frequently) in a conversation with peers.

terminological needs and usage. The commission has indeed been trying to promote an 'official' terminology without paying much attention to the computer users' 'real' usage or without soliciting from the beginning the experts' input. This has reinforced the idea that the commission's work is mainly a political exercise. Pressures from the public though have sometimes made the commission or the French Academy rethink a decision. Since 1989 the commission has been trying to promote the use of the expression *disque optique compact* as the equivalent of what French computer users know as "CD-ROM". Faced with the lack of success of the French term, the Academy approved in June 1996 the French equivalent *cédérom*. Although this decision produced a perfectly French-looking word, the acronym kept being used in popular publications.

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