

Isaacs, T. (2008). Review of [Defence of French: A language in crisis? by R. Adamson]. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 64(3), 526-528.

Adamson, Robin. (2007). *The Defence of French: A Language in Crisis?* Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters. Pp. 199, US\$59.96.

On March 23, 2006, former French president Jacques Chirac stormed out of an EU summit after his fellow countryman, Ernest-Antoine Seillière, addressed an audience of EU leaders in English. Chirac defended his action by expressing that he was ‘profondément choqué’ (‘deeply shocked’) by the Frenchman’s abandonment of his mother tongue in favor of English, proclaiming that ‘you cannot build the world on only one language, and hence one culture’ (*l’ABC de la langue française*, 2006). Ironically, Chirac’s rhetoric on the defence of French language and values perpetuated the very monolithic culture and linguistic hegemony in his own country that he so vociferously spoke out against in the context of the EU.

Robin Adamson’s book confronts the passion-rousing and politically-charged topic of the defence of the French language, weaving through the narrative the theme, echoed in Chirac’s quote, that language and culture are inextricably intertwined in policy and practice. The book also exposes paradoxes brought about by political expediency, where what appears in the guise of the linguistic is often overshadowed by political motives. Contrary to what is implied in the second part of the title, however, the focus is less on demonstrating whether or not the language is in crisis (e.g., showing the extent of the decline through statistics) than on *explaining* the impassioned commitment of the French to their language. That is, after briefly acknowledging the different viewpoints surrounding the notion of French as a language in crisis (and revealing that its extinction is not imminent, despite the alarmist tactics employed by some of its defenders), Adamson moves to the more substantive treatment of defensive action as it interfaces with language, politics, power, and identity. Attitudes underlying actions

taken by official and non-official organizations dedicated to the defence of French are historically situated.

The scope of the book is essentially restricted to Europe, with a focus on France. The ability to extrapolate to the language situation in Quebec, a hotbed of the defence of French outside of France, is limited, although readers well-versed in Quebec language policies will undoubtedly draw their own parallels. In one passage, Adamson makes the unfortunate error of referring to the membership of the two ‘Canadian *state* governments’ of Quebec and New Brunswick in an international francophone organization (CONFEMEN), although this oversight is likely unintentional (p. 22, emphasis added).

Overall, Adamson’s writing is clear, engaging, and accessible. The book is logically organized under innovative headings (e.g., ‘*La Francophonie: Commonwealth and Common Wealth?*’) and the goals of each chapter are clearly delineated, although the Index could be more comprehensive. Chapters 1-3 outline the history of the defence of French from the time of the first language decree in the 16th century until present, describing government involvement in the protection and promotion of French through the workings of the four official agencies (e.g., l’Académie française). Although tables summarize useful information pertaining to the structure of these organizations, hierarchical relationships are not visually apparent and could perhaps have been better represented in flow charts. Chapters 4 and 5 explore the interaction between language and politics and compare relevant aspects of French language policy with those of four Western EU countries. Chapter 6 elaborates problems and contradictions in the history of the defence of French with a foray into the subject of language as a symbol of identity. The book concludes with a useful summary of defensive actions by the two main actors – powerful government agencies and weaker private organizations. In looking to the future, Adamson propounds the affirming message that replacing the defeatist attitude of doom and lost-cause with confidence in the place of French in a pluralistic France and, in turn, in a multilingual world, is key

to ensuring the continued presence of French in the global linguistic palette. This entails viewing language change as a sign of the vitality and adaptability necessary for the language to thrive rather than as an indicator of its decline and demise. Perhaps with the passage of time, it will become increasingly apparent that French is, indeed, “escaping from the straitjacket of the past” and morphing into a “democratic channel of communication for the whole francophone community” (p. 174).

This book is a must-have for French policy experts and dilettanti alike, in short, for all those interested in garnering knowledge about defensive activities as they relate to French. It is also likely to be insightful to those more broadly concerned with language planning, linguistic equity, identity, legislation, and/or the defence of other languages. One of the qualities of this book that makes it fit for the 21st century is its emphasis on internet resources and the impressive compilation of websites in the bibliography to encourage further exploration and research.

References

ABC de la langue française, L'. (2006, March 24). *Chirac sort quand Seillière parle anglais*. Retrieved May 22, 2007, from http://www.languefrancaise.net/news/index.php?id_news=365

Talia Isaacs, *McGill University*