New spaces for language policy discussion: Online forums and French language ideologies

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Presented to the Council of Ministers in March 2013, the Fioraso law is designed to overhaul the domain of higher education and research in France. Article 2 of the law proposes that a foreign language can be employed as a language of instruction in some university courses in order to attract international students, necessitating a modification of the 1994 Toubon law that protects French as the language of education in France. Although there is no specific mention of the use of English in Article 2, it is assumed that this will most likely be employed owing to its position as the current international language of science and scholarship. As the influence of the English language and English-speaking culture has been a concern amongst a section of the French population for half a century (famously sparked by Etiemble’s Parlez-vous franglais? in 1964), it is unsurprising that the proposal led to passionate debates on language policy in France.

The Internet offers an important space for individuals and groups to voice their opinions and to engage in discussion in a variety of forums. In a way that would have been impossible previously, people are enabled to participate in a discourse on a national and international scale on issues that affect their everyday lives. Taking a folk linguistics approach, this paper will examine the language attitudes expressed by the general public (i.e. non-linguists) towards current French language policy. It will analyse comments made in three online discussion platforms, namely Twitter, the electronic version of the newspaper Libération and comments made in response to an e-petition against the Fioraso law. By identifying trends in public opinion towards the law, this will indicate the language ideologies of French Internet users towards the status of English, and indeed French, in France today.

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