

Civilisation

The concept of the French word civilisation, has its roots in a post-Enlightenment discourse that developed into the ideology of colonialism in the nineteenth century. The French (and British) imperial project was promoted on the basis that it brought a superior civilisation to peoples considered as less developed. This perspective was challenged in the twentieth century by anthropologists who promoted cultural relativism and by postcolonialist scholars in history, literature and applied linguistics. Nonetheless, the concept of civilisation has persisted well into the twenty-first century in language teaching. It is commonly used and readily understood in the context of teaching and learning French as a foreign language (FLE). In spite of its connotations of cultural superiority the word is often used to designate that part of a language course that includes sociocultural knowledge intended to complement and give context to the linguistic content.

This entry explores the development of the teaching of civilisation noting its institutional link with the French state. It explores the difficulties in conceptualising the term adequately and in finding an appropriate pedagogy. Together these help to explain why the term has been gradually replaced since the nineteen eighties by concepts incorporating the word culture such as *cultural studies, cultural anthropology, *intercultural communication, cultures.

The purposes of language teaching developed as part of French foreign policy in the colonial era have persisted to the present day. The presentation of French civilisation, in a broadly positive, uncritical light was the mission given to the *Alliance française, set up in 1884 to spread the use of the French language in the colonies and elsewhere overseas. Another colonial era institution flourishing in the twenty-first century is the prestigious Cours de Civilisation Française de la Sorbonne, founded in 1919. Its policy is steered by a board that includes representatives of the ministries of the Interior, Education and Foreign Affairs. The Alliance continues to recruit and train teachers to run classes or provide tuition and it organises conferences and supports the production of teaching material. It thus has a strong institutional position in the teaching of French as a foreign language and has been influential in helping to define the cultural content of language courses.

For many years and in many places one of the main vehicles for the promotion of French, explicitly linked to the Alliance française, was the Cours de langue et de civilisation françaises (Mauger, 1953) which combines the teaching of French grammar with a story line based on a foreign family visiting France and discovering its everyday life and institutions. The France presented by Mauger is a single social entity, with a single, neutral or standard form of expression. French civilisation is presented as if it were the culmination of the Jules Ferry educational reforms of the 1870s, namely as a single nation with a single language. Regional and social variations are invisible. The institutions and monuments presented are largely in Paris and chosen to prepare students for an encounter with literary texts in the fourth volume. Thus one persistent tradition within French civilisation, strongly challenged since the advent of *communicative methodology, was a monolithic view of language, culture and society aligned with a nation and a state.

Leading French language teaching specialists Galisson and Coste (1988) propose three definitions of civilisation, namely:

- the act of civilising
- the characteristics of civilised societies
- the characteristic features of a given society.

The first of these refers to the colonial ideology, based on a hierarchy of cultures, whereby the colonising power embarked on a mission to bring less developed cultures into modernity through imposing new institutional structures, including schools. The second definition, whilst potentially referring to any society, tends, in a French language context, to take France as the model. French Republican principles are considered by their proponents to be universal as well as national. Civilisation therefore has connotations of Frenchness.

The third definition is the one most closely associated with language teaching. Whereas education in general can be seen as a civilising process and an understanding of the nature of civilisation is likely to be acquired through the study of history and the humanities, language learners need a knowledge of a range of cultural references in order to have a full understanding of texts in the target language. In this sense civilisation can also be applied to the features of societies whose languages are studied by French learners, as in civilisation britannique.

Technical developments in sound recording and the availability of photographic images for classroom use led to the development of *audio-visual courses, initially, as in Voix et Images de France (*CREDIF, 1960) still based on a specially written standard language. The course content was dominated by linguistic necessities rather than by a real desire to transmit cultural knowledge. By the time of C'est le printemps (CLE, 1976) course writers had introduced a wider spectrum of characters and situations as well as a *functional rather than grammatical syllabus. However, further technical advances together with the development of educational television and video and the availability of photocopying enabled teachers to have access to a greater range of representations of France and the French language. The move to *communicative language teaching, with its stress on authentic materials paved the way for a reconsideration of what might be considered to be civilisation.

Whereas language learning in the tradition of the Alliance française aimed to initiate learners into a high and very literary culture, from the 1960s the purposes were increasingly instrumental and to do with tourism and commerce. Alongside the high culture, courses started to contain elements of popular culture which widened the definition of civilisation. One reason for this is that communicative language teaching requires learners to respond and react and so texts are chosen with this in mind. Another is that universal access to secondary education and foreign languages was thought to necessitate engaging with learners at their level, rather than inducting them directly into a high culture which might be doubly alienating as both foreign and socially unfamiliar.

During the 1980s civilisation was the term for teaching about French and Francophone culture in French as a foreign language (FLE) courses in France. The field developed rapidly together with specialist teachers, conferences and journals such as *Le Français dans le monde*.

Whereas coherent methodologies for teaching language have been developed, following theoretical and empirical research on language acquisition, no single approach to teaching civilisation has emerged. Beacco (1996) and Chalançon (1996) describe teachers lecturing to classes, enlivening them with personal anecdotes or, in an attempt to promote discussion, introducing themes around which there is public or

media interest and often political controversy: youth culture including drugs, the development of multicultural societies, unemployment, the media. Given that the emphasis within foreign language classes has tended to be primarily on the linguistic potential of a stimulus document, students are likely to be asked comprehension questions in the foreign language or to translate or to summarise part of the text, however controversial the topic. There may be discussion, but this is likely to be constrained by the learners' linguistic competence and thus may not lead to an improved understanding of the topic. Stereotypes and unsustainable generalisations may even be reinforced during this process.

Two developments within the field of language learning have provided a framework for the development of a pedagogy able to integrate civilisation into a unified programme of language-and-culture teaching (Byram et al., 1994). The first is a concern for autonomous learning, which emphasises investigation and research or savoir-faire. Students may learn to decode implicit assumptions in language material. The second is *intercultural education which uses insights from *Cultural Studies and *anthropology and stresses a reflexive process involving making comparisons between cultural forms in an attempt to achieve a non-ethnocentric perspective. Le Berre (1998) maintains that civilisation in the 1980s effectively became anthropologie culturelle. Its aims and techniques included objectivation, constructing provisional knowledge through observing difference and oppositions, and contextualisation.

By the twenty-first century, the colonial connotations of civilisation, together with the development of increasingly multicultural nation-states and the lowering of national boundaries, made it a term that was increasingly perceived as anachronistic as language teachers saw their mission as teaching language and cultures rather than a single culture.

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(See also: area studies, cultural studies, Landeskunde, culture)

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