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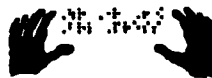
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cates of free trade denounced the law as the product of an elitist, anti-democratic state bureaucracy on its last legs.

The law passed with votes from Toubon's own center party. An opinion poll cited in the press found 93 percent of French in favor. But opinion polls are an American invention; who believes them? My impression was distinctly different. The French public, hit by the worst recession since the '40s, worries about unemployment, corrupt politicians and increasing crime among the disaffected young. *L'affaire Toubon* is strictly for laughs.

Sure enough, in August the Constitutional Court threw out Toubon's law, ruling that it infringed on freedom of speech as guaranteed by France's 1789 Declaration of Human Rights. The government could legally police the utterance of its own officials, but commerce and the media were outside its domain. Life triumphed over theory; youth over age.

This is no mere figure of speech. The language quarrel divides the generations. On one side you have those whose lives were shaped by de Gaulle, the War, the Occupation, the Resistance, the loss of France's overseas colonies. Remembering de Gaulle's dictum that nations decline from power to glory to prestige, they make the French language an instrument of foreign policy. The results are sometimes benign (annual Francophone Olympics where youngsters from the former colonies compete in outfits designed by Balenciaga) and sometimes sinister (the debacle in Rwanda, prepared, his critics say, by President François Mitterrand's blind spot for the Francophone Hutus against the rebel Tutsis, trained in Anglophone Uganda).

On the other side you have those who grew up with TV, rock'n'roll, cheap travel, massive immigration into France from the former colonies, the global economy and years of structural unemployment. The safely ensconced, old-guard purists vs. the insecure young postmoderns. The appeal of Americanese is that it's more fluid, less hierarchical than French, which has been pruned and codified for centuries by a group of pompous old guys in the Académie Française. French kids adopt Americanese the way East European dissidents wore jeans and ran jazz fan clubs in the '60s and '70s, to show their impatience with the status quo.

Franglais, by the way, is spelled English and pronounced French. The other way around is no longer Franglais, but—such is the legitimizing power of orthography—good French, as in the standard bistro cheap meal, *stackfrites*. Why not naturalize the American invaders with a simple spelling change, one wag suggested. T-shirt could become *ticheur*, etc. Franglais would disappear, and with it, the raging controversy.

The movie critic at *Libération* made a brave start in that direction, signing off a column on the subject with a breezy *Bâ-baille* (bye-bye). Bailler, you see, is French for yawn. ◀

Suzanne Ruta is a political satirist and cultural critic.



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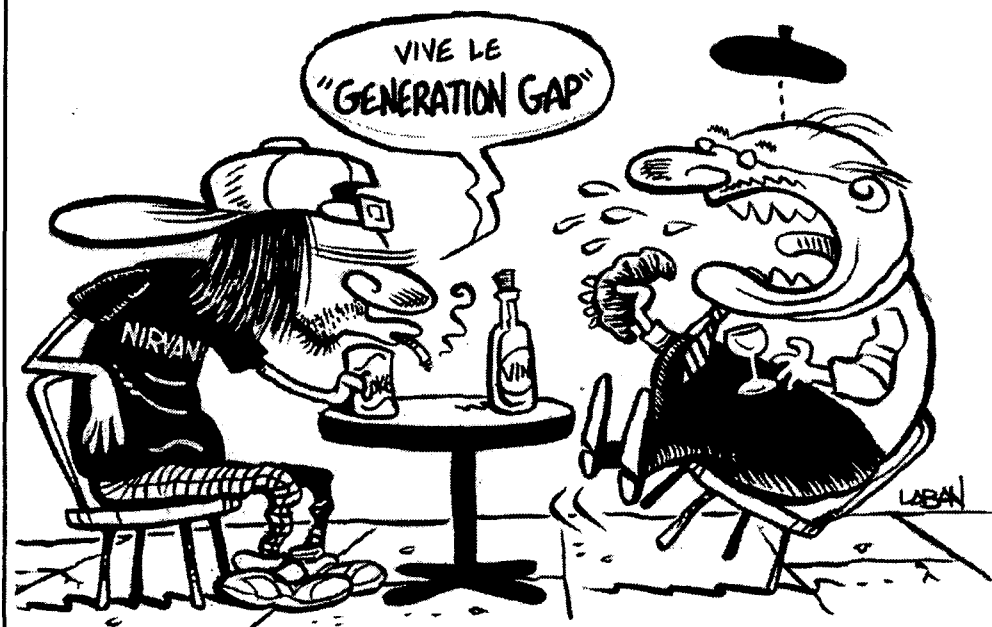
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I N T H E E N D

Francophone Games 1994



By Suzanne Ruta

The first time I saw Paris was in 1964. The franc was weak, the dollar strong, but French prestige and moral rectitude were high. Jean-Paul Sartre had just turned down the Nobel Prize. As an American exchange student, I expected to be snubbed, and I was not disappointed. "*Votre travail pululle d'anglicismes,*" my prof scrawled in red ink at the bottom of my first assignment: Your work swarms with Anglicisms. As if they were gnats or fleas.

But times have changed. The dollar's weak, the franc is strong and France is a nation of trans-Atlantic wannabes. Their language bores them. They prefer ours. Consider: A Breton hog butcher with global marketing ambitions calls his growing commerce "Olympig." The sugar cubes in every Paris bistro are labeled "Daddy" (as in sugar daddy?). Renault markets a small four-door sedan called "Kid" with walls and seats of faded blue denim. Rival Citroën puts out the "Bebop," upholstered in a jazzy red-blue-green design, Mondrian dumbed down by marketing executives. Even the political press swarms with Anglicisms. Both the stodgy right-wing *Le Figaro* and the trendy left-wing *Libération* report on politics in the words of Carville and Matalin: le

challenger, le flop, le wonder-boy, le self-made man.

Even stranger: the people who invented the double-entendre have become tired of delicate suggestion in matters of the heart. They want to lay it on the line. The phone line, that is. The *Minitel*—the computerized, interactive service run by the state telecommunications monopoly—makes phone sex available to every household in the country. You dial 3615 TOSS for a good time on "*le Minitel du TOSSing*." Or, if you're really daring, 3615 CUM. Deep in the countryside—in Catholic, conservative Brittany, a disco called *Le Marilyn* runs Friday night events for "single people." On a more rarefied level, a critic in *le Figaro* asks Mexican poet Octavio Paz whether he believes in "*le big bang de l'amour*."

The French take their language very seriously, and a backlash was inevitable. A law introduced this spring by Jacques Toubon, France's *ministre de la culture et de la francophonie*, mandated the

use of French in public and private schools, at scholarly conventions, in print, radio and TV advertising, on billboards, in employment contracts, in user's manuals. It imposed 10,000-franc fines for first-time violators; 20,000 for repeat offenders; 50,000 francs and six months in jail for those guilty of obstructing enforcement.

The law specifically prohibited the use of foreign loan words in cases where a French equivalent exists. Since the mid-'70s, when a similar (if seldom enforced) law was passed, a quasi-official High Commission for the French Language has overseen these coinages. The glossary of government-approved terms is available via Minitel. You dial 3617 DICO and they give you the legal French for TOSS? Difficult. Four-letter words in French tend to have at least six letters.

This was probably not the reason the left abstained from voting when the bill reached the Chamber of Deputies in late June. The Socialists maintained that you couldn't legislate the appeal of a language. Communist opponents of free trade denounced the law as a feeble stop-gap: Frenchmen's jobs, not their verbs, needed protection. Conservative advo-

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