Education minister awarded the ‘rug’

Annual ‘booby prize’ given for promotion of English in France

By Oliver Rowland

HIGHER Education Minister Valérie Pécresse said this year’s winner of the Carpe Diem Anglais booby prize for promoting English over French after she urged more use of the language in universities. According to the Académie de la Carpe Diem Anglais – a panel of judges including writers, politicians and members of language defence bodies – Mrs Pécresse said French was “in decline” and wanted to “break the taboo of English in European institutions and universities.”

The minister has said every university student must be offered English classes as part of their degree and proposed that some lectures be given in the language.

“We can’t let a child come out of our education system without speaking it,” she said. “The carpe diem (rug) is so-called because of the ‘borne-own’ implications of the French term, suggesting servile acceptance of the increasing use of English in France. It is not a physical prize but it is widely publicised.”

The académie’s secretary, Marc Favre d’Echallens, said the choice of language was not the same as whether one used some English words in French — such as the word weather — acceptable and no worse than male-fem in English.

However, he said the body was concerned about a tendency for wholesale replacement of French by English risked, in 50 years, English becoming dominant in France.

“It’s not that we are against English in any sense but we would do anything to see all university teaching end up in English,” he said. “We don’t want a situation where everything important is done in a foreign language. It would be a loss to French and French culture.”

Mr Favre d’Echallens said the academy did not agree with promoting one language as the main international one. “We believe in linguistic diversity but the motto of the EU is ‘union in diversity’ and the idea was to favour speaking and working in different languages, not just one.

“If you want to work with Germans or Spanish people it is more useful to learn German or Spanish,” he said. “We think in international negotiations, or promoted in companies, because they speak good English, even though they are not the most competent.”

He added promoting routine use of English gave an unfair advantage to native speakers.

“None of us ever goes quite as confidently in a foreign language as in their native tongue.”

He said Mrs Pécresse was chosen because of her job. “If it was a businesswoman who said those things it would not be as bad as she represents France,” he said. “The constitution says the language of the Republic is French. The French official language is the language with a capital ‘L’, that opens up the world but it only opens a part of it.”

Meanwhile, the European Commission’s statistics service, which issues its “Statistics in Brief” updates in English only, is planning to introduce French and German, won a special ‘carpe diems’ for an international body. Mr Favre d’Echallens said English was in danger of becoming the only effective language of the EU. “They celebrated the 50th anniversary in 2007 and all the posters in Brussels had the slogan ‘together on them’,” he said.

Carpe Diem runners-up included Education Minister Xavier Bertrand for insisting pupils become bilingual and Carrefour, whose Champion supermarket (a French-origin word) are now to be called Carrefour Market.

Mr Favre d’Echallens said: “I can’t see how that is going to give them a single extra customer. At one point France imported 80% of its wine from abroad; but we replaced it with supermarket wine.”

He said signs of encouragement of English in France included recent prosecutions for firms that forced people to work in English, contrary to the law. They included one making medical scanners, he said, which expected people to do highly technical work in English, and an insurance firm which insisted staff use an English version of software.

He was also shocked by France’s decision to put forward an English-language Eurosong song last year. “It is symbolic of the way things are going — that France is not capable of putting forward a singer who sings in French,” Mr Favre d’Echallens said. The carpe diem was a prize (a booby prize) which was meant to be satirical but with a serious goal.

He added that he was worried for the future of French. “If people all start working in English, French won’t exist anymore,” he said.

As a related issue, he said he was concerned about the lady French many young people spoke. “These days people say ‘voilà’ instead of ‘ce n’est pas’ (see article below) and don’t use proper inventions for questions like ‘just ze - they say ‘je peux’ instead.”

Mr Favre d’Echallens said maternal English-speakers could learn good usage from classic literature or the best contemporary writers, like Jean d’Ormesson — rather than radios or TV shows.

“Foreigners might think French is a complicated language but the best French is clear and simple,” he said.

Send in your worst ‘English in French’ horror stories

Our e-mail box is always open for further contributions to our gallery of ‘English in French’ horror stories.

The Théâtre Carpe Diem is the booby prize for French establishment figures who boast the creeping use of English — however it works both ways. We too at The Connexion regularly get our teeth out unnecessarily, misused, pointless or bizarre anglicisms in France.

For example, linguistic borrowings are nothing new. Stewards of English derive from Norman French (castel, court, justice) — apart from recent entries like four ou à la carte which still “Talk! French”.

French has been returning the favour for centuries — 18th Century examples include bourgeoisie, boulangerie and restaurant (boulanger = boulanger; boulangerie = boulanger and restaurant).

However to language purists, trendy uses of English is a suitable French word exist or blase of using English assuming French people understand, is beyond the pale.

French writer René Fénélon identified the trend in 1964 when he coined the word franjulage — but the phenomenon increases every year. Sometimes English words are used in cutaneous contexts, seemingly only for the craic, and the worst examples of English words in French. We also welcome suggestions for the name of this column, currently known as the Carpe Diem, at contact@connexionfrance.com.