Using Industry Profiles in Business French: A Survey of the Seventh Art

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In a paper at the 1986 MIFLC Convention held in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, I described a fledgling course in Business French at Meredith College, outlined its objectives, and recommended several course-related activities and resources. This article presents another approach to teaching Business French that I now use. Following a brief update on the course, I want to suggest how the assignment of written profiles of French industries can not only broaden the scope of the course but also challenge students to sharpen their language skills. My remarks are based on classroom experience, on personal research, and on information gathered at "L'Europe en marche," a seminar organized in Summer 1991 by the *Services culturels*.

Business French at Meredith

Our department offers the typical language and literature courses, but Business French (FRE301) at Meredith College is also regularly taught in the spring semester of odd-numbered years. To enroll, students must have completed second-year college French or the equivalent, though in fact most have considerably more experience with the language. Altogether, 37 students have finished the course since its inception in 1985; a few have subsequently completed internships in the United States and in France. In 1987 and again in 1991, several students earned the *Certificat pratique*, which is awarded by the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris (CCIP).

Most of our class time in the Business French course is devoted to three activities: vocabulary acquisition, including translation; reading and discussion of pertinent news items; and the development of basic skills in correspondence. For these, we use Le Goff's *French for Business/Le français des affaires*, the "Vie économique" section of the *Journal français d'Amérique*, and handouts culled from the French press (notably *Le Nouvel Observateur*) and from the *bulletins de liaison* of the CCIP. These authentic documents offer a challenge to students. They are also a

welcome change from Le Goff's useful but sometimes tedious chapter dialogues.

Given this emphasis on fundamentals, we find it easy to fall into the same pattern class after class. To vary the routine, this year I invited a technical translator from Rhône-Poulenc Ag, a French-owned company located in North Carolina's Research Triangle Park, to discuss her work. Also, in a series of lessons on Europe 92, I asked students to summarize—as in a consecutive translation—short segments of an English-language documentary on the subject. Unlike other language classes in the department, Business French carries no laboratory requirement. To increase opportunities for listening practice, therefore, in class we use comprehension exercises from Dany and Noé's *Le français des employés: services/commerce/industrie*, from CRAPEL's *écoute . . . écoute* and Siskin's *A l'écoute de . . . Publicités Radio France*, and from other audio sources, both commercial and in-house.

Assigning the industry profile

Another way to inject variety is to have students investigate the domestic and international operations of French companies. In Spring 1991, partly in response to a request for more written work in the course, I asked students to take a closer look at specific French businesses and the industries they represent. We began simply by naming some French corporations, then focused on three types: those whose products students might have purchased, for example, Bic ball-point pens; corporations which have taken over former American-owned firms, for instance, Michelin's acquisition of Uniroyal Goodrich; and French companies such as Texasgulf, Alcatel, Rhône-Poulenc, and, more recently, Groupe Schneider, operating within a 25-mile radius of Meredith College. To focus on them, we consulted a directory of foreign-owned firms published by the state's Department of Economic and Community Development.

Students were then asked to undertake research for two short papers to be written in French. They were first to prepare a 500-word case study of an individual French corporation, e.g., Peugeot, and then to write a 750-word profile of the industry represented by the corporation selected (in this case, French automakers). The students were also told that, toward the end of the semester, they would have to give an oral report based on either of the papers. I have found that such assignments are most effective when subdivided into smaller tasks with due dates that are about a month apart. As a final step, students compared their selections to avoid repetition of subject matter.

A sample industry profile

Since most students of FRE301 are not business majors, they need a concrete definition of the term "industry profile." Perhaps because of our department's emphasis on film-based comprehension exercises or because students initially picture in their mind's eye a kind of Hollywood-sur-Seine, the French film industry seems to fascinate them. It may also interest them because theaters in North Carolina's Triangle area (comprising the cities of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill) feature a new French film every two or three weeks. Students soon find, though, that a new, more pragmatic era has dawned in the filmmaking industry. As France prepares for the social and economic changes that will inevitably accompany European integration, the industry is shedding what remained of its romantic image and becoming leaner and meaner in the process. Indeed, French movie moguls are internationalizing and industrializing film, sometimes called the seventh art. To define "industry profile" with an interesting example, I therefore offered a survey of recent developments in the PCF—in this case, not the *Parti communiste français*, but the *paysage cinématographique français*.

"A Survey of the Seventh Art"

Despite repeated upswings in movie attendance in France and numerous international hits, the French film industry has been in decline since the mid-fifties, when television first became affordable for many consumers. As French households acquired their sets (125,000 in 1955, 9.3 million in 1969), annual movie attendance plummeted from 395 to 184 million. According to René Bonnell, another phenomenon—urbanization—accompanied this trend, depriving the industry of its most faithful customers, the working class. There were, after all, few theaters operating in the suburbs where these workers settled; moreover, as more and more workers migrated to the cities, the industry shut down the unprofitable houses in the towns and villages they left behind. Meanwhile, the number of movie studios also fell from 55 in 1961 to only 11 in 1989.

Observers seem to agree that the latest crisis, which lasted from 1985 through 1987, brought the industry nearly to its knees. The malaise was so pervasive that worried theater owners no longer spoke of stabilizing box office receipts, but rather of slowing their freefall. For example, in 1987 only 132 million people attended the movies in France, a drop of 19% from the previous season. The decline even became the subject of government white papers and of a few films like "Splendor."

Most news was discouraging in those dark times. In 1986, more people in France were interested in seeing American films than French productions. This disturbing trend seems sure to continue. In 1990, for example, the 146 new French-made films competed with 138 American productions including "Dead Poets' Society" and "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids," respectively the number one and number three films in France that year. As a result, American films now have a French market share of about 57% as opposed to 37% for French films. By contrast, France has yet to gain a real foothold in the United States. Though French films remain first among American imports, France's market share in the United States is less than 1%—a figure comparable to the market share of Albanian films in France.

Moviemaking in France has been a state-sponsored industry since 1946. As in the post-war years, which brought a program of automatic film subsidies, the state intervened during the recent crisis to rescue the industry. A program established in 1986 aims to speed the distribution of commercially-promising releases to mid-sized cities. Thirty-three films, including adaptations of Marcel Pagnol's novels *La gloire de mon père* and *Le château de ma mère*, took advantage of this support last year. Numerous other programs were created in the mid-eighties by Minister of Culture Jack Lang; these provide sponsorship for work by new directors, subsidies for big-budget releases, and funds to buy and restore private theaters facing demolition.

Notwithstanding the broad range of state aid to the industry, the financing of each new film remains a formidable task. Producers must assemble a package of subsidies, loans, and—with luck—advances on receipts for their films to appear. Their difficulties stem, on the one hand, from the shrinking audience for French-language films, and, on the other, from the delayed return on investment. As a result, budgets have remained low. In 1985, for example, Claude Berri's "Jean de Florette" / "Manon des sources"—at the time "the biggest production in the history of French film"—ran to only about $7 million per film. According to the Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC), the average cost of a French film today is only about $3.4 million. Still, recent blockbusters have cost considerably more: in 1988, Besson's immensely popular "Le Grand bleu" ran $15 million, and Annaud's "L'Ours" cost $20 million.

Other notable trends in the industry include a growing dependence of film on the other audiovisual sectors; an internationalization of the film industry; and, in a related development, a new tolerance for the use of English in French-produced films.

Some observers fear the "seventh art" in France is in danger of annexation by other audiovisual concerns, notably television and cable. In this context, René Bonnell (France's premier film economist who, by a twist of

fate, recently became CEO of cable giant Canal +) has described television's bulimia for films both foreign and French. In 1990, for example, the five French television channels and Canal + aired nearly 1400 films. On the other hand, despite its old hostility to television, the film industry is being forced to maximize television and cable revenues in order to remain profitable. Not only does television broadcast completed films, it has come to influence production as well: television's financial involvement in filmmaking actually tripled between 1985 and 1990. In 1988, for instance, Canal + alone wielded a budget of 430 MF for production.

Intensive foreign investment is also increasingly evident in French film credits. Attentive movie-goers have already noticed the growing number of international coproductions which pass, at least in theaters in the United States, as 100% French offerings. CNC's director, Dominique Wallon, confirms the trend: nearly one-half of these nominally French films have international backing. European producers are inclined toward partnership with France's moguls because, as Wallon says, "it is here that the financial mechanisms—for Europe, at least—are the most generous and the most perfected."

A key concept of European integration, international cooperation has existed in France since 1949, when a Franco-Italian pact promised that for joint productions there would be subsidies from both governments and distribution of the film in the two countries. More recently, the European Community (EC) has begun to support high-budget international coproductions. In 1990, for instance, the Eurimages program spent its $17 million budget for film projects involving at least three countries. In a related matter, the national film industries in the EC countries continue to be frustrated by linguistic barriers. A recent EC brochure notes that fully 80% of the films produced in Europe never leave their country of origin. In order to insure a wider audience for its films, therefore, the EC will also provide funds for subtitling and dubbing films and for establishing a Community-wide system of film distribution.

A final, notable aspect of internationalization is French support for French-language films produced in other countries. Not only does France offer grants for films from Belgium, Quebec, and Switzerland; her Minister of Culture, Mr Lang, has also become the sole patron of directors from former colonies in Africa. Among recent African recipients are directors from the Ivory Coast (Ecaré for "Indépendance Chacha") and Senegal (Sembene for a documentary history of his homeland).

Meanwhile, French filmmakers struggle for visibility in the profitable American market. Yet, American audiences apparently have a low tolerance for subtitles and dubbing. Despite the modest American success of such recent movies as "La femme Nikita," "Cyrano," and "Jean de

Florette," the typical French film usually plays only in out-of-the-way art houses, not in crowded shopping malls. Even Gaumont's three showcase houses in New York City cleared a total of only about $10,000 in 1990. Given their limited distribution, French-language productions will probably never approach the level of sustained profitability of American films in France.

Nevertheless, a recent initiative which has raised a few eyebrows in France, may eventually increase the visibility of French releases in the United States. Though the CNC continues to support only French-language productions, Mr. Lang has recently granted official status—and thus eligibility for state subsidies—for English-language films produced in France. This new resource is already being exploited by French producers. In an article entitled "French Filmers Increasingly Lured to English-Lingo Pics," *Variety* reports that many such French-backed films also benefit from American pre-financing. Yet another path of entry is the bilingual film, for instance, Tavernier's "Daddy Nostalgia" whose main characters alternate between English and French. The promotion of English as a language of French film is not as revolutionary as it may seem; it is reminiscent of the French reaction to the introduction, in 1928, of the "talkie." From 1930 to 1934, filmmakers at the Saint-Maurice studio in Paris had scripts translated into several languages, including English, and then used a different cast of actors for each version of the film.

Thanks largely to the generosity of the French state, the film industry remains a viable enterprise. Cynics might say, however, that the industry has profited handsomely from its own prolonged demise. At any rate, while moviemaking has slowed across the Channel and beyond the Alps, France clings to her position of world leader after India and the United States. In 1990, for example, while France put out 146 films, Italy made 119, the UK 53, and Germany 48. As for movie-going, the CNC underscores France's average as the highest attendance per capita of any European country.

What will the shape of the industry be in the near future? Forecasts are risky in a business less than 100 years old, but—given the trends—we can expect two developments: first, in view of the interrelatedness of the audiovisual industry's different sectors, it is likely that a single government ministry will eventually coordinate filmmaking, television, video, and cable in France. Second, as the EC's most prestigious, most active, and most prosperous filmmaker, France will emerge after 1992 as the European industry's leading dealmaker as well. In this broader role of broker among equals, France may yet achieve the ultimate coup and blast the "Terminators" and "Rambos" from her charts.

Researching the industry profile

By reading the French version of this model (see below, in the Film Industry section of Works Consulted), students gain numerous ideas for their profiles, but are often uncertain whether they can "find enough information" about the industries they choose. While abundant information is available, the instructor—in consultation with the reference librarian—must help students find it in the short time allowed. To assist my students, I prepared a "selected bibliography" for distribution in class.

Four reference works in particular are helpful. The *International Directory of Company Histories*, edited by Lisa Mirabile, has hundreds of interesting, up-to-date articles on international corporations, including such French firms as Thomson, Renault, Pernod Ricard, and Rhône-Poulenc. Many of the items are accompanied by short bibliographies. Articles from newspapers, magazines, and specialized journals are also useful. The business equivalent of the MLA Bibliography, the *Business Periodicals Index*, helps students to find items pertinent to their projects. For my survey of the film industry, for example, I scanned summaries of articles from such professional periodicals as *Variety, Film Comment, Broadcasting*, and *Billboard* for current information on the industry. Students can also gain access to valuable bibliographic data in the *UMI Periodical Abstracts Ondisc* and the *UMI ABI Inform*, which provide abstracts as well as references. These resources, I have found, can be critical to students' success. A third source is the lively, thorough book *L'Etat de la France et de ses habitants*. Coordinated by Jean-Yves Potel, this book is an encyclopedia of life in modern France. Along with articles on business and industry, it treats immigration, the lottery, and where the French *say* they make love. The fourth source is the easy-to-use *Panorama de l'économie française*, published annually by "Science et Vie Economie."

Ideally, students could practice letter-writing by requesting information directly from the corporation or industry they wished to study. Doing so, however, would require patience on the part of the student and flexibility on the part of the instructor. In addition, there is always the risk that the corporation might not respond. Practically speaking, I have found that using the above-named library resources is a quicker, more dependable way of compiling the information that the students need for their projects.

Evaluating the industry profile

Though there is always room for improvement, I was generally pleased

with the students' execution of this project. Such assignments provide a kind of practical infrastructure for the course, and they have the added benefit of allowing students to choose corporations of personal or professional interest. Among the industries my students investigated this past semester were the automotive (Peugeot, Renault), chemicals (L'Air Liquide, Rhône-Poulenc), food and spirits (Moët-Hennesey, Nestlé), banking (BNP), and the luxury goods category (Dior, Chanel).

Industry profiles are, in a sense, a window on the real world. Upon completing the Business French course, my students have found a meaningful context—that provided by the industry profile—for the vocabulary and letter-writing skills they acquire in their day-to-day classwork. In particular, they have learned the history, challenges, and plans of a French industry, and heard reports on a dozen more. Thus, in fifteen weeks they have not only sharpened their language skills but also gained insight into the economy of contemporary France.

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