

HAPPY AND GLORIOUS: FRENCH AT THE SYDNEY OLYMPICS

The French are rightly proud of Pierre de Coubertin and his role in the founding of the modern Olympics, and the use of French as an official language of the Games is firmly established in the IOC Charter, as well as in international practice. It was therefore something of a surprise that in the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics we witnessed a brief flurry of awkwardness when the Governor General, Sir William Deane, announced that he had declined to use French for the opening ceremony of the Games.

There was no obligation for French to be used in this situation: the organisation of the opening ceremony depends on the local organising committee, and practice had varied considerably in previous Games. The original suggestion to the Governor General had come from SOCOG, and the press reported that the French Ambassador, Pierre Viaux, himself a former Olympic athlete, was offering his support for the idea. In the midst of these events came the public statement by prominent TV journalist, Mary Kostakidis, an accomplished speaker of French, that she certainly would not use French before English in her Olympic role: she believed that since Australia was an English-speaking nation, it was quite inappropriate to speak in French before English. Whether the Governor General was still wavering by that point, he was clearly caught in a difficult position, and the path of least resistance would have been to stick with English, which he did.

In the event, apparently troubled by feedback in his earphones, Sir William struggled a bit to get the magic sentence out, and perhaps it is as well that he did not have to repeat it in French. In the excitement and colour of the opening ceremony, however, this tiny hiccup was barely noticed. Nor was there any coverage of what happened to Mary Kostakidis in the wake of her declaration. She was in fact quietly replaced, as was inevitable. For although the press did not pick up the point, the fact was that her position had nothing to do with the opening ceremony. She had been offered the role of Master of Ceremonies for the general assembly of the International Olympic Committee — where the use of French before English is obligatory under the rules of the Olympic Charter.

This little eddy of linguistic conflict may have provoked some passing anxiety among the French, and indeed among those Australians who struggle against their country's monolingual currents. But as the opening ceremony showed, the French and English commentaries sat comfortably and smoothly beside each

other, as finely honed as the brilliant spectacle itself, an integral part of the dramatic build-up of an evening that culminated with the lighting of the cauldron. And if my memory serves me correctly, the French announcements preceded the English version — except at the moment when, after that beautifully paced and suspense-filled procession of women passing the torch gradually closer to the cauldron, it was finally revealed that Cathy Freeman was the chosen one. Did the English commentator jump the gun at that point, out of excitement or chauvinism? Or was the change of order pre-arranged? Or did I, being so moved by the whole sequence, and so proud to be part of the same community as those women, simply imagine that it was in English that I first learned about Cathy Freeman's special role?

By all reports, the overall use of French at and around the Sydney Games was greater than what had been the case at other recent Games. At all the sites, including the commercial areas and the restaurants, all signage, both internal and external, was bilingual, as were all written documents: the athletes' information packs, the brochures concerning the different sports, the daily news bulletin of the Olympic Village (which had a print-run of 15,000). In some places, such as Darling Harbour, where French-specialist events like judo and fencing were held, the visibility was even stronger (French is of course the official language of fencing). There were over 100 volunteer interpreters recruited by SOCOG for their expertise in French, whose job it was to support the various francophone delegations and press groups, and many hundreds of other volunteers whose knowledge of French was designed to ensure the widespread presence of the language throughout the period of the Games.

Such a level of francophone activity does not happen by chance. It was the result of long and careful preparation, and of extensive cooperation among members of SOCOG, the IOC, the French Embassy, and the Alliance Française. In the three years leading up to the Games, the Alliance provided intensive language training to hundreds of SOCOG agents, and hundreds of other volunteers. There was no evidence of any negative reaction, either in the streets of Sydney or in the press. No francophobic propaganda appeared as graffiti on the walls of the Homebush stadium, and no francophone athletes were threatened by mobs of angry anglophone monolinguals.

I was in Australia only for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Sydney Olympic Games. The rest of the time I spent with my wife in Paris, where the language of the Games was entirely French, and the view of events predictably gallo-centric. The word 'chauvinism' has its origins in France, and it is a characteristic that was every bit as apparent in the Paris media coverage of the

French performance as it was in the Australian media's coverage of our local heroes and heroines. But it was nice to note a theme of homage to Australia. There seemed to be real enthusiasm in the commentary on Cathy Freeman's gold medal, and, every morning during the two weeks of the Games, TV 5 ran a five-minute segment on aspects of Australian life, designed, directed and presented (in French) by a young Australian, Mat Campbell, who at the end of each show farewelled his audience with a winning smile and a 'See yer later'.

That French is an official language of the Olympic movement is one of the reasons adduced for its usefulness in those endless justifications that teachers of French are forced into. Although it is clearly a good reason, and although the experience of French in Australia during the Sydney Olympics can be rated as very positive, it is unlikely to have much effect on the longer-term teaching and learning of French language and culture in this country. It would require a complex and comprehensive investigation to find out whether the Olympic linguistic experience was in any way stimulating for the local education system, but my bet would be that its impact was negligible. By following the Olympic Games around the world, French helps maintain its profile as an international alternative to English, and that is an important background dimension for those who, in the Australian context, are engaged in promoting the value of learning other languages. But now that the Olympics are over, it is the local institutions that will, once again, take up the major part of that task, and especially the teachers in the schools and the universities. These groups receive invaluable support from France: the Alliance directors and their assistants, the linguistic attachés in the various State governments, and the scholarships and visitors' schemes provided through the Embassy, which also facilitates a vital French presence in the nation's great round of festivals. The list is considerable, and it has enabled the establishment of a very solid network in respect to which the Olympic Games will prove, I suspect, to have been fairly peripheral.

The network will need to develop urgent measures to compensate for the unfortunate (and in the view of this writer misguided) closure of the Melbourne Consulate, which for almost a century and a half has played a vital role, both material and symbolic, in the support of French. For the position of French in Australia, this event is more significant in the potential damage that it will provoke than any lasting benefits to be derived from the wide-spread use of French at the Olympics. The aggressive monolinguals are still out there in large numbers in the community, still asking the same questions that have been answered so many times, and still threatening the policies and practices that give French some protection in our education systems. In an exchange that took place in the Melbourne Age between Christmas and New Year 2000 (and that

was hence doubtless missed by many), the monolinguals and the defenders of foreign language learning had a minor skirmish. In the context of the Olympics, it is perhaps not insignificant that the letter that sparked the exchange was from a parent who was decrying the place of Languages Other Than English in his son's primary school curriculum, on the grounds that Physical Education was more important.

The Queen's English has now become the language of the Global Empire, long to reign over us. That is a given. But with a little care, we can continue to nurture linguistic and cultural spaces that are beyond the reach of the iron lung. Perhaps the most moving part of the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics was the dimension given to the theme of reconciliation between Australia's indigenous peoples and its immigrant populations. In political terms, the road to reconciliation is long and difficult, but the Olympics showed that, as a community, we are capable of imagining it and imagining for it high-minded and original forms. It seems to me that there is congruence between this spirit of reconciliation and an Olympic movement that seeks to encourage a multitude of voices and the self-fulfilment of many peoples. French has a special stake in here, not so much because of the particular historical role of Pierre de Coubertin but because it has maintained itself internationally as an expression of freedom and pluralism.

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The Editors regret this delay, and apologize to Prof. Nettelbeck.