

‘Exception française’: *splendeurs et misères* of a formula¹

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Abstract

Used at first with their original (definite) article, the phrases *exception française* and *fin de l’exception française* gained instant notoriety after the publication of Furet, Julliard and Rosanvallon’s 1988 book *La République du centre: La fin de l’exception française*. Before too long, the shorter phrase, which (contrary to what is sometimes asserted) was already in existence, also started occurring without the article, with other determiners, and in the plural. This paper details some of the *splendeurs et misères* (including progressive trivialization) of both the longer and the shorter phrase, thought of as exponents of a single *formula*.

It is often said that titles sell books (for a recent example, see Frishman and Spizman, 2015: 149). When a book has only one title, as is the case with many

¹ This paper has greatly benefited from the comments of three anonymous reviewers, who have made it clear how much more research is needed to get to the bottom of the formula ‘exception française’. All imperfections that remain are obviously my own.

works of fiction, that one title may have to do all the work, unless the author is well-established and his or her books literally fly off the shelves. Non-fiction books, on the other hand, tend to have titles that go straight to the point and may need a catchy subtitle to add to their appeal. A good example of this is François Furet, Jacques Julliard and Pierre Rosanvallon's 1988 book *La République du centre*, which includes three single-authored essays preceded by an unsigned preface, and is subtitled *La fin de l'exception française*. The fact that the book was reissued in a second expanded print run before the year's end (Collard, 2004: 35; 2010: 22)² had probably little to do with the main title, which refers to just one of the messages Furet and his colleagues sought to convey in their respective essays. That message was that France, at the eve of the bicentenary of the French Revolution, under the stewardship of François Mitterrand, was no longer what it used to be: even though the far right was more popular than ever, the right wing of French politics had lost

² The supplementary section includes, among other texts, an interview with Jacques Julliard that starts as follows: 'Votre *République du centre* suscite des réactions contradictoires, basées souvent qui plus est sur les contradictions qu'on croit apercevoir entre vos propres points de vue'. The original appeared in the November/December 1988 issue of *Le débat*, under the provocative title 'Droite, gauche, centre. L'exception française: fin ou recommencement?' (pp. 4-10).

its majority and France, now governed by a centrist socialist party, had become ‘une république du centre’.

There was another message, though: according to the authors, several other characteristics that made France stand out, such as its centralized state (Loughlin, 2013) and the French republican model of citizenship (Gianni, 2013), to name but a few, were being eroded. French politics was losing its defining features and was joining the ranks of other democracies in the Western world. What better way to describe this than by referring to ‘la fin de l’exception française’? As it turns out, it did not take long for numerous sometimes diametrically opposed views on French exceptionalism to be aired in a variety of outlets including both scholarly publications and the popular media. Once again, it had been proven that, to trigger debate on the reality of something or other, few strategies appear to work better than to openly claim that this something or other has ended and therefore no longer exists (Hewlett, 2004: 4). Nothing could grab the attention more, especially in the French languaculture, than a subtitle highlighting the fact that something exceptional about France was coming to an end.

But whose subtitle was it? In a line of thinking that is in direct contradiction with second author Jacques Julliard’s claim, made in 2008, eleven years after Furet’s death, that ‘he and François Furet had “invented” the expression specifically for the book’ (Collard, 2010: 35), I would like to venture that, in reality, the authors’ choice, ‘La fin de l’exceptionnalité

française’, a direct quote from the preface,³ was *amended* by the publisher. The reasoning behind this hypothesis is that, if the authors themselves had come up with the snappier version, the same wording would probably also have been used in the preface.

Ultimately, of course, the exact authorship of the subtitle does not matter. What does matter is that French phraseology, all of a sudden, was enriched with two phrases (i.e., *exception française* and *fin de l’exception française*) that acquired instant notoriety in the wake of the public debate following the release of Furet *et alii* (1988) and that, in all likelihood, would not have taken off if, instead of *exception*, the clunkier *exceptionnalité* had been used. I am tempted to suggest that *La République du centre*’s subtitle came within a whisker of having *no* impact on French phraseology – and French discourse – at all.

The present paper looks at the effects the subtitle has had on the latter. It defines the sequence *exception française* as the main exponent of a *formula* with a ‘pre-formular’ history (cf. Krieg-Planque, 2003, 2009), then comments separately on the post-1988 usage of phrases such as *la fin de l’exception française*, *l’exception française* and *une exception française*, before drawing attention to the creeping trivialization of the formula and its translations in

³ Cf. Furet *et alii* (1988: 11): ‘Ce que nous sommes en train de vivre, c’est tout simplement la fin de l’exceptionnalité française’.

other languages (with special reference to English). It ends with a few afterthoughts on the additional research required to do full justice to the formula under investigation.

Before I get started, attention needs to be drawn to an important disclaimer. I acknowledge that, in recent years, there appears to have been a shift in the non-trivialized use of the phrase *exception française*. That shift occurred sometime during Sarkozy's presidency, as demonstrated in several essays in Chafer and Godin (2010), a complement and companion volume to Godin and Chafer (2004). The early Sarkozy, like many others, wanted to break with the past, and do away with the French exception. Then came the 2008-09 global economic and financial crisis. From something desperately out-of-date that was not about to end (in spite of the claims to the contrary made in *La République du centre*), but that was felt to be a 'millstone around the neck of France, from which it needed to be liberated' (Chafer and Godin, 2010: 3), *l'exception française* developed into an attractive model, a 'potential blueprint for Europe, and indeed the rest of the world, to follow' (*ibid.*: 4). In this paper, I do not pursue that shift *per se*; instead, I set out to show how two phrases (*exception française* and *fin de l'exception française*), associated with the same *formula* ('exception française'), came to at least partially detach themselves from the political context in which they had caused such furore, and started to live a life of their own.

1. ‘Exception française’: a formula and its proliferation

In contemporary French discourse analysis, the concept of a formula plays a major role thanks to the work of Alice Krieg-Planque, who describes a formula’s genesis in the following terms:

À un moment du débat public, une séquence verbale, formellement repérable et relativement stable du point de vue de la description linguistique qu’on peut en faire, se met à fonctionner dans les discours produits dans l’espace public comme une séquence conjointement partagée et problématique. Portée par des usages qui l’investissent d’enjeux socio-politiques parfois contradictoires, cette séquence connaît alors un régime discursif qui fait d’elle une *formule*: un objet descriptible dans les catégories de la langue, et dont les pratiques langagières et l’état des rapports d’opinion et de pouvoir à un moment donné au sein de l’espace public déterminent le destin – à la fois envahissant et sans cesse questionné – à l’intérieur des discours. (Krieg-Planque, 2003: 14)

Formulas such as ‘démocratie participative’, ‘discrimination positive’, ‘malbouffe’ and many more (for a longer list of examples, see Krieg-Planque, 2009: 10) may mean different things to different people. They lend themselves to debate, discussion, even polemic, and circulate widely. To say of a formula that it circulates widely is equivalent to saying ‘que les gens en

parlent, que ses lieux de surgissement se diversifient, qu'elle devient un objet partagé du débat' (Krieg-Planque, 2006: 24). On the other hand, a formula is much more than a single verbal sequence. The following definition (Krieg-Planque, 2009: 7) shows exactly what is at stake:

Par *formule*, nous désignons un ensemble de formulations qui, du fait de leurs emplois à un moment donné et dans un espace public donné, cristallisent des enjeux politiques et sociaux que ces expressions contribuent dans le même temps à construire. Ainsi, par exemple, nous pouvons considérer que des formulations telles que 'mondialisation', 'mondialiser', 'anti-mondialisation', 'anti-mondialistes', 'alter-mondialisme', 'alter-mondialistes', etc., constituent les variantes d'une même *formule* – la formule 'mondialisation' [...].

The name given to a formula is usually that of one of its most common exponents (Krieg-Planque's *formulations*); it may or may not be the name of the exponent that gave rise to it. At the origin of the formula 'exception française' is the exponent *fin de l'exception française*,⁴ used in Furet *et alii*'s (1988) subtitle, rather than the exponent *exception française*, which is more recent (notwithstanding the existence of pre-1988 occurrences that belong to the 'pre-formular' stage; see below). Neither *exception française* nor *fin de*

⁴ Unlike Krieg-Planque, I use single quotes to refer to a formula and italics for the exponents subsumed by it.

l'exception française show any sign of disappearing any time soon. Both became fixtures of French discourse virtually overnight, in titles and headlines as much as in running text. Before too long, the formula started occurring with other determiners (e.g., a demonstrative or an indefinite article), without an article (i.e., in its own right) and in the plural. The following examples illustrate some of the proliferation with reference to France's *grandes écoles*:

- (1) L'exception française: le modèle des grandes écoles à l'épreuve de la mondialisation (book title, 1999; French exceptionalism as illustrated by the *grandes écoles*)
- (2) La mondialisation et la concurrence entre les établissements vont rendre de plus en plus difficile le maintien de l'exception française des grandes écoles. (*Le Monde*, 13/6/96; the French exception of the *grandes écoles*)
- (3) De surcroît, le système est faussé par une composante spécifique: le poids des grandes écoles. Cette 'exception française' récupère d'une part une bonne partie des meilleurs cerveaux. De l'autre, elle a

clairement la préférence des entreprises. (*Les Échos*, 10/3/04; a reference to the previously mentioned *grandes écoles*)⁵

- (4) *Big is beautiful*, tel est le nouveau mot d'ordre dans les grandes écoles, ces exceptions françaises de l'enseignement supérieur vieilles de deux siècles. (*Le Figaro*, 21/5/05; the *grandes écoles* as French exceptions, in the plural)
- (5) Une exception française: les grandes écoles (*Le Français dans le Monde* 278, 1996; the *grandes écoles* seen as one of a number of French exceptions)
- (6) Votre constat est trop pessimiste pour les universités et trop optimiste pour les grandes écoles, exception française qui ne correspond plus aux besoins du pays. (*L'Express*, 8/9/10; the *grandes écoles* seen as one of a number of French exceptions, no article)
- (7) Après tout, les fameuses grandes écoles, autre exception française avec toutes leurs qualités, et les stéréotypes qui y sont liés, ne forment que 37 000 des 300 000 diplômés sortant chaque année de l'enseignement supérieur. (*Challenge*, 14/12/06; the *grandes écoles* as another French exception, no article)
- (8) Grandes écoles: la fin d'une exception française (book title, 2008; the end of a specific French exception, namely the *grandes écoles*)

⁵ Quotation marks can be interpreted in a number of different ways. With respect to the data used in this paper, a blanket decision has been made not to read anything into their use or otherwise, except in section 2.

Exponents not illustrated in these examples include *exceptionnalité française* (the wording used in Furet *et alii*'s preface) and *exceptionnalisme français*, to name but a few. The same idea, and therefore the same formula, can also be captured in clausal exponents such as *La France est exceptionnelle* or *La France est unique*. This paper is limited to the kinds of exponents shown in examples (1) to (8).

2. The 'pre-formular' stage

Modest but real evidence of relevant pre-1988 usage of the phrase *exception française* suggests that it is incorrect to assume, with Collard (2004: 32; 2010: 19), that, prior to Furet *et alii* (1988), there was no convenient label to refer to the idea that France is different, and that the shorter of the two phrases (*exception française*) ultimately owes its existence to the longer one (*fin de l'exception française*). It also suggests that the idea the shorter phrase seeks to capture has been around for some time, and it casts doubt on British journalist Andrew Jack's (1999a: 21) claim, on which I will have more to say below, that it 'was originally coined in the form of *l'exception culturelle*, to justify a special status given to culture to protect it from the vagaries of free market forces'. Why would it not be the other way round (as argued, for instance, by Rousso, 2010: 20)?

On current indications, the oldest relevant uses of the phrase seem to go back to 1926 and 1931, respectively; they were found in the BNF's Gallica database (<http://gallica.bnf.fr>). In a long essay on French author and literary critic Désiré Nisard, Ernest Seillière (1926: 212) talked about the « exception française en matière d'hégémonie culturelle » posited « à plus ou moins juste titre » by Nisard in his *Études de mœurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence* (1834). As it turns out, the phrase does not occur in Nisard's work; it appears to be a more recent label for a reality construct that, if Seillière is to be believed, must have existed in the 19th century.⁶ On the other hand, in a 1931 report printed in the *Bulletin R.G.E.*, a weekly supplement of the *Revue générale de l'électricité*, Henri de Peyerimhoff, who at the time was president of the *Comité central des houillères de France*, wrote that the French exception had effectively ended. His words deserve to be quoted in full:

- (9) Au milieu des perturbations qui ont troublé l'an dernier l'économie de presque tous les pays, l'exception française a pris fin. Étendues par contagion lente à notre pays, les crises extérieures, pénétrant

⁶ Another name that frequently crops up in discussions of *l'exception française* is that of famous 19th century historian Alexis de Tocqueville (see, e.g., Cazes, 2004). Attempts to locate occurrences of the phrase in Tocqueville's writings have also remained unsuccessful.

l'organisme économique, ont ralenti de mois en mois l'activité de ses industries principales. (Peyerimhoff, 1931: 121B)

The focus here is on how France and her industries, too, had got caught up in the international crisis that had previously stifled the economies of many other nations. Apart from a brief reference in a chronicle published shortly after in the April/May issue of the magazine *La France active*, Peyerimhoff's words seem not to have attracted any attention. It was probably one of those assessments nobody could really disagree with or wanted to be seen to endorse. What is interesting, though, is that in the *France active* chronicle, the words *l'exception française* appear between quotation marks: it is reported that 'au Comité des Houillères de France, M. de Peyerimhoff a constaté que "l'exception française" en matière de crise a pris fin' (Tisserand, 1931: 98). The intended meaning of the quotation marks will of course never be known. Were they used to signal that these were the mining executive's original words? Did they also convey the message that, in the chronicler's view, the phrase was perhaps inappropriate or had a somewhat unfamiliar ring about it?

I have not attempted to retrace in detail the history of the phrase *exception française* from the 1930s onwards – let alone the history of the corresponding *proto-formula* (Krieg-Planque's collective term for related tokens in the pre-formular stage) – but I do believe it is fair to say that in the sixty years or so

that separate Seillière and Peyerimhoff from Furet and his colleagues it must have been ‘in the air’. It certainly was in the 1980s: the phrase appears in a 1984 paper by Stendhal scholar Michel Crouzet talking about France as Stendhal would have known it – yet another return to the 19th century:

- (10) Le plus souvent nous trouvons la France seule, opposée à toutes les nations, y compris parfois l’Angleterre, qui sera dans un autre registre associée à la France. Les pays qui ont une substance, une possibilité d’inspiration spontanée, une sorte d’innocence, bref justement un romantisme naïf et traditionnel, s’opposent à l’exception française; le mariage à la française, le règne de la vanité, l’absence de sentiment, et d’imagination, l’incompréhension de la force et de la grandeur, la carence en fait de passions et de génies, le fait que le bonheur français n’ait rien de comparable au *brio* italien, au *snug* anglais, au *gemuetlich* allemand, ces points rejettent la France du côté d’une ‘sécheresse’, d’une carence d’être et de sensibilité, rares sinon uniques en Europe. (Crouzet, 1984: 76)

That, at least in the 1980s, the phrase was ‘in the air’ is perhaps also what Jack (1999a: 21) meant when, in his book called *The French exception*,⁷ he

⁷ Jack (1999a) is perhaps the only English book on the French exception to have been translated into French (Jack, 1999b). Oddly enough, the words

established a link with Jack Lang's references to *exception culturelle* (see above), stating that Mitterrand's long-serving minister of culture during the 1980s and early 1990s 'was *as responsible as anyone* for the origin of the phrase' (italics added).

3. *La fin de l'exception française, post-1988*

Ten years after Furet *et alii* (1988), who were the first in modern times to proclaim *la fin de l'exception française*, Lovecy (1999: 205) noted that the phrase 'still enjoy[ed] a strikingly widespread currency within and outside France, providing a recurrent leitmotif in newspaper headlines as well as academic writing' – not to mention titles of radio and television broadcasts. It goes without saying that its use as a subtitle had played a major role in this process. There can be little doubt that its fate would have been quite different if it had been buried in text, like Peyerimhoff's reference to the end of the French exception in 1931.

Looking at the evidence, nothing much has changed since Lovecy's (1999) finding. Few endings, if any, are as consistently referred to in headlines and

exception française are not used in the French title, even though the translator must have known that Jack was using the English version of a phrase that, over the previous 10 years, had spread like wildfire.

titles (including those of radio and television broadcasts) as that of the French exception. We will limit ourselves to examples from the ‘post-Lovecy’ era that stick to the pattern adopted by Furet *et alii* (1988) – a pattern that accounts for nearly all occurrences.⁸ With the exception of punctuation marks, examples (11) to (13) are as close to the ‘Furet pattern’ as it is possible to get:

- (11) Enchères: la fin de l’exception française (*RFI*, 29/11/01)
- (12) Rémunération des comptes: la fin de l’exception française (*Libération*, 6/10/04)
- (13) Diesel: la fin de l’exception française (*Le Bien Public*, 10/5/15; see also example 20)

When the end is felt to be near, but is not quite a reality yet, the adverb *bientôt* is used:

- (14) Impôts: bientôt la fin de l’exception française (*France Bleu*, 15/6/15; see also examples 43 and 75)

⁸ References to *la fin de l’exception française* also appear in running text, but are relatively rare. The following example is taken from *Le Monde* (28/10/11): ‘Cette référence au voisin allemand serait naguère très mal passée, une ingérence inadmissible dans les affaires françaises. Elle vaut aujourd’hui brevet de crédibilité. C’est la (vraie) fin de l’exception française.’

A question mark is added to signal a mere hypothesis, a prognosis that remains to be confirmed:

- (15) Laïcité – la fin de l’‘exception française’? (*Le Monde*, 15/5/03; see also examples 46, 64 and 71)
- (16) Jeux vidéo: la fin de l’exception française? (*Alternatives Économiques* 233, 2005)
- (17) François Hollande et l’OTAN: la fin de l’exception française? (*Atlantico*, 6/9/14)

In addition, the preposition *vers* may be inserted, as in examples (18) to (20):

- (18) Le nouveau Conseil constitutionnel. Vers la fin de l’exception française? (*La Semaine Juridique*, 30/7/08)
- (19) Immobilier: vers la fin de l’exception française? (*Alternatives Économiques*, oct. 2011)
- (20) Voitures diesel: vers la fin de l’exception française? (*Le Figaro*, 25/11/14; see also example 13)

Finally, there are headlines and titles that are a mere replica of the 1988 subtitle, with or without a question mark, with or without the adverb *bientôt*

or the preposition *vers*; it is not until one has had a closer look that it becomes clear in what sense the French exception referred to has or might come to an end. Thus, one of the texts in a feature on *automédication* in the November 2006 issue of the magazine *Pharmaceutiques* is titled ‘Bientôt la fin de l’exception française?’

4. *L’exception française, post-1988*

Very different labels have been applied to the formula ‘exception française’ since it was unwittingly popularized by Furet *et alii* (1988). *Douteux vocable* (*Le Monde*, 28/11/97), *étrange concept* (Stasse, 2002: 109) and *heureuse expression* (*Le Monde*, 15/7/07) reflect the very different stances that have been taken in the debate surrounding the French exception.

Post-1988 occurrences of the formula’s most obvious exponent (i.e., *exception française*, preceded by a definite article) can be subdivided into two groups. The first of these continues the usage illustrated in section 2 and highlights the fact that, in France, things are different or are done differently:

- (21) Là où les Américains annoncent les ‘gains’ espérés (donc les diminutions d’emplois), l’exception française oblige à dire qu’on fera tout cela ‘sans licenciements’. (*Libération*, 11/3/99; see also examples 25, 39, 51, 55 and 58)

- (22) L'exception française est-elle devenue 'l'exception honteuse'? À en croire une grande partie des déclarations des partisans du oui en France, la victoire du non renvoie ce pays à une situation d'isolement total – dans une Europe à juste titre perplexe devant un débat idéologique d'un autre âge... (*Le Monde*, 3/6/05)
- (23) Tout est à moitié prix, sauf les livres, protégés par leur prix unique et l'exception française. (*La Croix*, 18/5/13)

References to a sector where *l'exception française* is explicitly said to exist or not exist, or where its existence is deemed possible, are common in the immediate vicinity of occurrences belonging to the first group. Examples (24) to (27) are not among the most recent ones, but they were chosen because they were all printed in the same newspaper over a period of just three years:

- (24) L'exception française est aussi forestière. À l'échelle de la planète, les forêts cèdent du terrain. ... En France métropolitaine en revanche, les surfaces boisées ne cessent de gagner du terrain. (*Le Monde*, 5/12/96)
- (25) L'exception française est surtout incontestable en matière d'emploi. (*Le Monde*, 9/9/97; see also examples 21, 39, 51, 55 and 58)
- (26) La fameuse 'exception française' n'existe certainement pas en matière d'habillement. L'instinct grégaire ayant agi sur toute la planète, les Français ont adopté, comme tous les autres, l'accoutrement des croque-morts. (*Le Monde*, 8/6/98)

- (27) L'exception française se manifesterait-elle en Bourse? (*Le Monde*, 4/10/99)

For some, especially in recent times, *l'exception française* is something that France and the French ought to 'defend' (*défendre*) and to 'preserve' (*préserver*), even to 'cultivate' (*cultiver*):

- (28) La France doit aussi 'gagner la bataille de la mondialisation' [...] en cultivant l'exception française (agroalimentaire, luxe, culture, tourisme). (*La Correspondance Économique*, 20/8/13)
- (29) La ministre de la Culture, Fleur Pellerin, vient de charger Pierre Cohen, l'ancien maire de Toulouse, d'une mission pour évaluer les problèmes qui touchent les festivals en France. 'Nous devons cultiver l'exception française'. (*La Dépêche*, 23/6/15)

Those who think that this is not a good idea use the same verb *cultiver* to describe what their ideological opponents have been doing, and point out what they should have done or should be doing instead:

- (30) Nos gouvernants successifs ... ont nourri le syndrome Astérix en jouant sur tous les tableaux: ils ont cultivé l'exception française, renoncé à toute pédagogie sur le monde actuel, utilisé Bruxelles

comme bouc émissaire sans s'investir sérieusement eux-mêmes dans ce nouveau lieu de pouvoir, etc. (*L'Express*, 18/4/05)

- (31) Au lieu de cultiver le mythe de l'exception française, qui n'est qu'un paravent du conservatisme au profit douteux de la nostalgie ou de la compassion, l'heure est à l'explicitation de la grande transformation du monde et à la définition d'une stratégie pour moderniser la France à marche forcée. (*Le Point*, 5/10/06)

Put an end to the French exception (*en finir avec*) and especially overcome it (*en sortir*) are activities that, at some point or other, have been on many an agenda or wish list:

- (32) Langues et cultures régionales. En finir avec l'exception française (book title, 2012)
- (33) Pour la droite, sortir de l'exception française, comme l'ambitionne le chef de l'État, est une véritable quadrature du cercle. (*Le Figaro*, 21/1/08)
- (34) Insatisfaction au travail: sortir de l'exception française (book title, 2012)

Finally, dozens of titles and headlines in books, newspapers, journals and magazines draw attention to something that is exceptional or remarkable

about France, sometimes in relatively vague terms, then refer to *l'exception française*, often after a colon or a dash:

- (35) Sondages en examen – l'exception française (*Le Monde*, 18/3/02)
- (36) Anti-israélisme et judéophobie: l'exception française (*Outre-Terre*, 2004/4)
- (37) Décentralisation: 'L'exception française' (book title, 2004)

These are instances belonging to the first group, as are titles and headlines that consist of nothing but the phrase itself. The texts that follow titles of the latter kind are mostly discussions of the idea behind the phrase: is it a myth or a reality,⁹ is it a useful idea or a waste of time, is it a cause for pride or for shame, etc. As one would expect, the comments are seldom neutral.

When a definite article is used to point to one particular exception rather than to French exceptionalism as a whole, we are dealing with instances belonging to a different group. Tokens in this group enter into a few common constructions, one of which, used both in headlines (examples 38 and 39) and in running text (examples 40 and 41), can be illustrated as follows:

- (38) L'exception française des médias et télécoms (*La Tribune*, 31/5/06)

⁹ A 2004 issue of the magazine *Sciences humaines* is titled 'L'exception française: mythe ou réalité?'

- (39) L'exception française du chômage permanent (*Le Point*, 21/5/09; see also examples 21, 25, 51, 55 and 58)
- (40) C'en est fini de l'exception française du 'ni, ni bancaire', qui veut que la rémunération des dépôts à vue des particuliers et des entreprises soit interdite, en contrepartie de la gratuité des chèques. (*Le Monde*, 6/10/04)
- (41) En vingt ans, le temps consacré au repas de midi est passé de 1 heure 40 à 22 minutes en moyenne, pour optimiser le temps de travail, au détriment du déjeuner. L'exception française de la pause de 2 heures, c'est fini depuis longtemps. (*Le Républicain Lorrain*, 13/1/13)

Tokens of the second group are also found in attributive constructions such as *l'exception française qu'est* + noun phrase, and variations on the same theme involving the verbs *constituer* and *représenter*, where the phrase *l'exception française* functions as an attribute of the following noun phrase:

- (42) À New York, Londres ou Shanghai, le nom de Christian Lacroix est synonyme d'exception au sein de l'exception française qu'est la haute couture. (*Libération*, 1/12/09)
- (43) Le problème n'est, certes, pas nouveau. Il est apparu avec l'exception française que constitue notre impôt sur la fortune – un impôt mal conçu dès l'origine avec une base étroite et des taux trop élevés. (*Les Échos*, 6/11/12; see also examples 14 and 75)

- (44) L'exception française que représente cet engouement pour l'euro se traduit également dans le comportement des consommateurs. (*La Croix*, 26/11/01)

A more emphatic form of this very French construction is exemplified in (45) and (46), where, instead of a definite article, a demonstrative is used.

- (45) Pas question, donc, pour Nicolas Sarkozy, ministre de l'intérieur et toujours président du conseil général des Hauts-de-Seine, de mettre un terme à cette exception française qu'est la pratique intensive du cumul des mandats. (*Le Monde*, 22/2/07; see also examples 48, 49 and 50)
- (46) Qui se souvient, en pleine polémique sur la laïcité, que la France est le seul pays d'Europe à nommer encore des évêques catholiques, à Strasbourg et à Metz, dans des départements concordataires? Étrange paradoxe qui complique encore la vision qu'ont nos voisins de cette exception française que représente la laïcité. (*Le Monde*, 12/12/03; see also examples 15, 64 and 71)

Demonstratives are of course also possible to describe as exceptional something that was mentioned before, for instance the *conseils de prud'hommes* in example (47) or the *cumul des mandats* in example (48):

- (47) Christian Roussin succède à Colette Jourdan à la tête du conseil de prud'hommes de Vichy. Il souhaite valoriser et défendre la pérennité de 'cette heureuse exception française'. (*La Montagne*, 15/1/11; see also examples 57 and 73)
- (48) Insistant sur la fin du cumul des mandats, Jospin souligne qu' 'il faut renoncer à cette exception française' car 'il y a une exigence des citoyens à cet égard'. (*Le Parisien*, 10/11/12; see also examples 45, 49 and 50)

Like the previous two examples, example (49) contains reported speech; a comparison with example (48) reveals that Lionel Jospin's apparently anaphoric use of the demonstrative has been overruled and become cataphoric, as in examples (45) and (46).

- (49) Lionel Jospin a appelé à 'renoncer à cette exception française' que constitue le cumul des mandats, massivement désapprouvé par l'opinion. (*L'Indépendant*, 10/11/12; see also examples 45, 48 and 50)

Particular exceptions can be described in all sorts of ways, either positive or negative. The one in (47) is held to be *heureuse*, another one (see example 56 below) is *vénérable*. Negative evaluations are more common, though. They are illustrated in examples (50) and (51):

- (50) Sans ces deux changements [le non-cumul des mandats pour les députés et une vraie réforme du Sénat; B.P.], nous n’obtiendrons jamais un véritable rééquilibrage des pouvoirs qui mettent un terme à la plus néfaste exception française: la monocratie qui étouffe la démocratie. (*La Croix*, 2/5/07; see also examples 45, 48 and 49)
- (51) La France peine depuis des lustres à [...] donner du travail [aux jeunes] et à maintenir dans l’emploi les seniors. La récession actuelle illustre à nouveau cette fâcheuse exception française. (*Le Monde*, 26/2/09; see also examples 21, 25, 39, 55 and 58)

Another noteworthy fact is that tokens in the second group, and their variants with a demonstrative instead of a definite article, lend themselves to pluralization – unlike tokens in the first group:

- (52) Ah! ces fameuses exceptions françaises dont aiment tant se gargariser les descendants des Gaulois! (*Le Monde*, 29/1/99)
- (53) Les mêmes lunettes ont longtemps empêché de voir que la plupart de nos partenaires procédaient à des choix différents des nôtres et l’on a glorifié les exceptions françaises quand il aurait fallu s’inspirer avec humilité des politiques menées avec succès à l’étranger. (*Les Échos*, 30/8/04)
- (54) Ils ont bonne mine, les libéraux, et avec eux, tous ceux qui passaient leur temps à vilipender les exceptions françaises, tous ces maux qui, à les en croire, plombaient le pays, le tiraient vers le bas,

l'appauvrirent et, non seulement handicapèrent les entreprises, mais transformèrent l'État en un monstre obèse et impuissant. (*Midi Libre*, 8/3/09)

The verbs *glorifier* and *vilipender*, used in examples (53) and (54), are situated at opposite ends of the spectrum and are also used for evaluative purposes. Different people have had different ideas on what to do with French exceptions. Often, they have simply wanted to do away with them, as in examples (55) and (56):

- (55) Il faut en finir avec l'exception française qui veut que, dans l'Hexagone, plus qu'ailleurs en Europe, les jeunes sont placés de façon quasi systématique au bout de la file d'attente des demandeurs d'emplois. (*Les Échos*, 16/1/06; see also examples 21, 25, 39, 51 and 58)
- (56) La commission est partie d'un a priori idéologique selon lequel une magistrature bienveillante composée d'hommes d'entreprise élus par leurs pairs est, par définition, moins impartiale et compétente qu'une justice professionnelle. L'objectif ultime est donc de mettre un terme à cette 'exception française' vénérable. (*La Tribune*, 3/7/98)

5. The shift from macro-level to micro-level

The use of the phrase *l'exception française* to refer to *examples* of the French exception, rather than to French exceptionalism as a general notion, represents a shift from the macro-level to the micro-level. This shift can also be illustrated through developments such as the use of an indefinite article, as illustrated in examples (57) to (59):

- (57) On a souvent présenté les conseils de prud'hommes comme une exception française, voire une juridiction unique en Europe. Eh bien, non. Il faut aussi compter avec l'un des cantons francophones d'un petit pays voisin, certes non membre de l'Union européenne, mais dont les habitants sont décrits par un poète du cru comme ayant l'habitude de 'traire leur vache' et de 'vivre en paix'. (*Le Monde*, 3/12/97; see also examples 47 and 73)
- (58) Peut-on vraiment parler d'une exception française en Europe, s'agissant de la lutte contre le chômage et des créations d'emplois? Oui... et non. (*La Tribune*, 1/3/01; see also examples 21, 25, 39, 51 and 55)
- (59) La France n'a jamais aimé ses services secrets, même si ses dirigeants n'ont pas de réticence à les utiliser. Il y a, sur ce sujet, une 'exception française', qui est culturelle. (*Le Monde*, 12/7/06)

In headlines and titles, the most common structure involving an indefinite article is the one illustrated in examples (60) to (62), where the exception itself is separated from the phrase *une exception française* by means of a dash, a comma or a colon:

- (60) La réforme Guigou s'attaque aux carences des tribunaux de commerce – une exception française (*Le Monde*, 18/7/00)
- (61) 'Mon Quotidien', une exception française qui cherche à s'exporter (*Le Monde*, 7/1/05)
- (62) Nos aînés entre tutelle et canicule: une exception française (book title, 2006)

In titles, the phrase *une exception française* can also appear on its own, much like the older variant with the definite article, or be followed by a relative clause, as in examples (63) and (64), where reference is made to the French specialty of *gynécologie médicale* and to French-style secularism, or *laïcité* (see also examples 15, 46 and 71), respectively:

- (63) Une exception française, née en 1965, que les femmes européennes envient (*Le Monde*, 7/5/99)
- (64) Une exception française qui intrigue l'Europe (*Le Monde*, 12/12/03)

More prudent assessments are phrased as questions, in headlines and titles (examples 65 to 67) as well as in running text (examples 68 and 69):

- (65) La révolution française, une exception française? (book title, 2004)
- (66) Le républicanisme social: une exception française? (book title, 2014)
- (67) La ‘politique de la ville’: une ‘exception française’? (*Espaces et sociétés* 128-129, 2007)
- (68) Cette crise, très longue, constitue-t-elle une exception française ? (*Le Figaro*, 12/9/15)
- (69) N’y a-t-il pas aussi une exception française de l’endurance, qui ne marche nulle part ailleurs? (*Le Journal du Centre*, 3/4/13)

Apart from the shift to indefinite articles, there is article *omission*, which is often (not always!) a manifestation of the shift from macro- to micro-level, both in headlines and titles (example 70) and in running text (examples 71 and 72). Article omission means that the formula ‘exception française’ is used in its barest form:

- (70) Télévision – exception française (*Le Monde*, 7/6/03)
- (71) L’expression ‘laïcité exception française’ est devenue un stéréotype, énoncé sur le mode de l’évidence. Or jamais les pères fondateurs de la laïcité ne se sont situés dans cette perspective. (*Le Monde*, 19/9/96; see also examples 15, 46 and 64)

- (72) Ce décret enterre enfin la semaine de quatre jours, exception française décriée par tous. (*Ouest France*, 12/2/13)

Once again, particular French exceptions can be either lauded or (more commonly) condemned, and the adjectives used to this end are obviously similar to those seen before:

- (73) À braquer tous les projecteurs sur le nouveau paysage syndical, qui est certes l'enjeu le plus immédiat et le plus attendu des élections prud'homales, on en oublierait presque que cette juridiction du travail est d'abord une heureuse exception française. (*Les Échos*, 12/12/02; see also examples 47 and 57)
- (74) Les libraires de proximité ont une carte à jouer. C'est une excellente exception française avec un réseau très développé et de qualité. (*Le Progrès*, 15/5/13)
- (75) Mais voilà, nous ne sommes pas dans une économie normale et l'ISF [impôt de solidarité sur la fortune; B.P.], douteuse exception française, est un des instruments les plus retors de toute l'histoire de la fiscalité. (*Le Figaro*, 16/6/06; see also examples 14 and 43)
- (76) Les stars du petit écran galèrent pour accéder au cinéma. Malgré leur énorme métier et plus de spectateurs qu'un Leonardo DiCaprio n'en aura jamais. Alors, pourquoi ça coince? Enquête sur une fâcheuse exception française. (*L'Express*, 4/3/15)

With the proliferation of French exceptions, the use of *encore*, *autre*, *nouvelle* and *de plus* has nothing extraordinary about it:

- (77) Retraite à 60 ans, 35 heures et privilèges catégoriels aberrants... encore une exception française qui plombe l'économie. (*La Tribune*, 28/5/13)
- (78) En annonçant, à 77 ans, qu'il serait candidat à l'élection présidentielle, Jean-Marie Le Pen rappelle une autre exception française: la persistance d'une droite extrême à très haut niveau. (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, 18/5/06)
- (79) Ancienne députée et considérée comme l'«architecte» de la réforme des retraites en Suède au début des années 1990, Margit Gennser est surtout frappée par une nouvelle «exception française»: la pénibilité. (*Le Figaro*, 4/9/13)
- (80) Une exception française de plus. La France est la championne européenne du faux monnayage. (*La Tribune*, 10/9/03)

The use of an indefinite article after the words *la fin de* is relatively well established, but not nearly as common as the use of a definite article. It is illustrated by means of the book title in (81) and the running text example in (82):

- (81) Le trader et l'intellectuel: la fin d'une exception française (book title, 2012)
- (82) On assiste à la fin d'une exception française qui voulait qu'on ne regarde la télévision que le soir ou l'après-midi pour les catégories de population disponibles. (*L'Est Républicain*, 31/1/13)

6. Trivialization in France and abroad

Inevitably, the proliferation of French exceptions and of French exceptions coming to an end has led to a degree of trivialization (Collard, 2004: 30), documented throughout this paper, that can be further illustrated with examples (83) and (84):

- (83) Les centimes d'euro, bientôt une exception française (*La Tribune*, 25/8/04)
- (84) Alors que certains de leurs voisins qui affichent des taux de croissance record boudent leur plaisir d'être parents, les Français, eux, continuent de faire des bébés. C'est l'exception française. (*La Tribune*, 23/10/06)

Even people have been referred to as *exceptions françaises*. One of them is l'abbé Pierre:

- (85) L'abbé Pierre était une exception française et la France a été, pendant plus d'un demi-siècle, fascinée par elle. (*Le Monde*, 24/1/07)

Another one, that I came across as I was researching the use of the *imparfait du subjonctif* by Jean-Marie Le Pen (cf. Peeters forthcoming), is the former leader of the *Front national*, described by journalist Philippe Meyer (2011) as 'cette exception française, ce dinosaure de la réaction, ce va-de-la-gueule à imparfaits du subjonctif, ce tribun, ce fanfaron, ce fier-à-bras, ce rodomont, ce bravache, ce m'as-tu-vu, cette momie, ce phénix de carnaval, ce rescapé de tous les naufrages'. Daughter Marine, on the other hand, seems to have stepped where nobody else has stepped before. Not content with being merely *une exception française*, she became *l'exception française* in person, after a statement she made in Nice on 31 March 2012, in the lead-up to the presidential elections, in which she told her supporters: 'Je suis l'exception française, je suis la seule candidate à croire en la France et à refuser que la France se dilue, que ses valeurs se diluent'.

It should not come as a surprise that foreign newspaper correspondents in France, whose job it is to report objectively on matters French but who have always taken considerable delight in commenting on what makes France and the French stand out, have played a part in the ongoing trivialization of the formula. Foreign press articles do sometimes quote it without relying on a translation; typically, though, they adopt a foreign language equivalent.

Examples include English, but also Italian (*eccezione francese*), Spanish (*excepción francés*), German (*französische Ausnahme*), Dutch (*Franse uitzondering*), Norwegian (*franske unntaket*), Polish (*francuski wyjątek*), Czech (*francouzské výjimečnosti*), Russian (*французское исключение*), Greek (*γαλλική εξαίρεση*), Turkish (*gelelim fransizlara*), etc. The net result of this proliferation of translations and reporting in the foreign media is that *l'exception française* has become, in the words of Rousso (2010: 23), as much 'une perception résiduelle des Français eux-mêmes' as 'une certaine image de la France dans le monde'. A few English language examples will suffice. Jack (1999: 74) refers to dog droppings on Parisian footpaths as 'one of the most unpleasant of French exceptions'. Binge drinking was the topic of a report published on 19 December 2005 in *Time Europe* ('French exception: As far as binge drinking goes, it's vive la résistance!') and child birth rates were discussed on 29 January 2007 in the *International Herald Tribune* ('A new French exception? Having more babies'), perhaps in the light of French media articles such as the one printed in *La Tribune* on 23 October 2006 (cf. example 84).

7. Concluding remarks

'L'expression "exception française" [...] chante plus qu'elle ne parle et promet bien plus qu'elle ne tient. Quel peuple constitué en nation n'est pas

exceptionnel?’ asked *Le Point* columnist Laurent Theis as recently as 15 August 2015. Indeed, Germany has its *Sonderweg* and the United States are rife with *American exceptionalism*, as is Italy with its distinctly pessimistic *anomalia italiana* (on which see Sassoon, 2013). There is however a major difference picked up by Hewlett (2004: 4) and also by Collard (2004: 43; 2010: 34). Hewlett, in particular, writes that ‘although the application of the notion of exceptionalism is indeed not peculiar to France, it is far more widespread than the notion as applied to other countries’. What the present paper has set out to do is detail some of the *splendeurs et misères* of the formula ‘exception française’ in French discourse.

Much more could have been said. Krieg-Planque (2003) has devoted a hefty volume of more than 500 pages to the formula ‘purification ethnique’, and the same would no doubt be possible for each of the formulas she refers to in her more recent monograph (Krieg-Planque, 2009; see above) and also for the formula ‘exception française’. What is needed for this purpose is a much more carefully defined corpus; the one used in this paper was a combination of the vast resources of the internet, tapped into with Google, and of a fairly superficial search in the archives of French newspapers contained in the Factiva database (<http://www.factiva.com>). No attempt was made at tracing the first occurrence of each of the various exponents of the formula. All we know for sure is that ‘exception française’ became a formula the day Furet *et alii* was published; but when was the phrase *l’exception*

française first used on its own, i.e., outside of the sequence *fin de l'exception française*? I did identify a few pre-1988 occurrences, which belong to the pre-formular stage, but more research would be needed here as well. How are the phrases *l'exception française*, *une exception française*, *cette exception française*, *exception française* further contextualized? What nouns, verbs and determiners do they occur with? When did each of these patterns first appear? In which areas of public life has the formula been most prolific? Some trends seemed to surface as I was collecting data (cf. the cross-references after selected examples), but these would have to be confirmed or otherwise on the basis of a more carefully controlled corpus, and a lot of number-crunching.

For the time being, I can offer no more than a very tentative conclusion. When *La République du centre* was published in 1988, little did anyone know that its subtitle had sown the seeds for a new kind of discourse that would prove to be at once extremely resilient, extremely popular and extremely versatile. Extremely resilient because, more than a quarter of a century later, it is still with us; extremely popular because it is widespread and most if not all French will be familiar with it even though the large majority have never read Furet *et alii* (1988); and extremely versatile because, with the passage of time, it lent itself to some novel, and probably quite unexpected, uses. The new kind of discourse centres on the formula 'exception française', with either a definite or an indefinite article, a demonstrative, or no article at all. It often talks about endings, or about the need to either preserve the, or a, French

exception, or do away with it. As is always the case, not all of that discourse is of the highest standard; over time, the formula has become prone to occasional trivialization, both in the French media and abroad. By the end of the twentieth century, Philippe Simonnot, writing for *Le Monde* (28/11/97), believed it was a ‘douteux vocable’ (cf. section 4), ‘redevenu à la mode’ (a surprising thing to say as, quite frankly, it had never really disappeared) and ‘employé à propos de tout et de n’importe quoi’. In this paper, we have attempted to highlight some (but only some) of the *splendeurs* AND *misères* of what has unmistakably become a household phrase. In the words of Michel Camdessus, president of the IMF, speaking in 1996, ‘l’exception française n’est plus ce qu’elle était, mais elle demeure, pour le meilleur ou pour le pire’.

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