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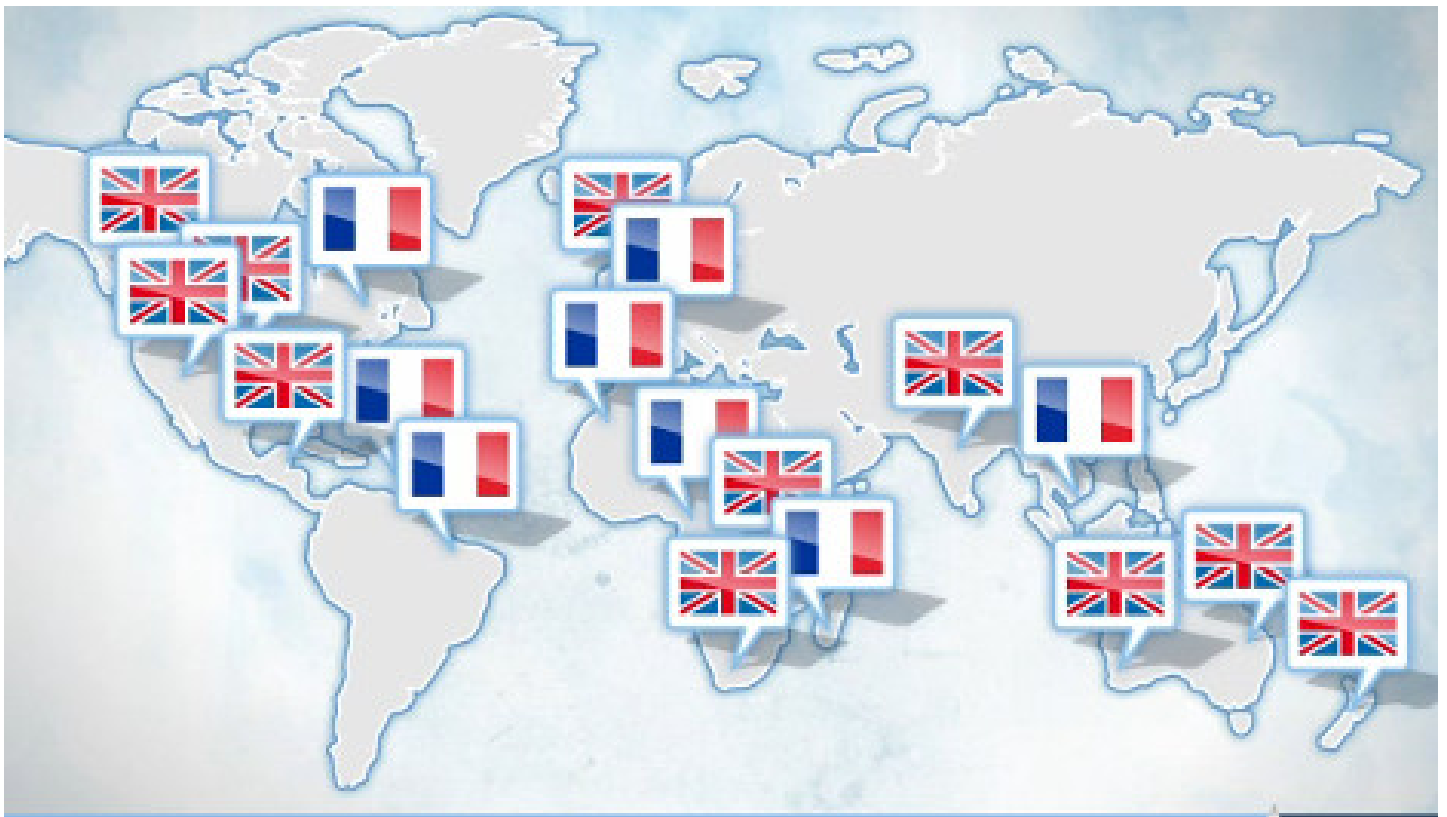


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## So what future does the French language have?



The French language benefits from demographic growth in sub-Saharan Africa where the language is given pride of place. Photo: Issouf Sanogo/AFP

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Is the French language slowly dying? Does it have a future? As France celebrates International French Language Day, The Local looks at the current status and future prospects of the language of Molière in the world today.

Those fanatical guardians of the French language over at the Académie Française have plenty to smile about these days.

Why? Because despite the dominance of English, the number of French speakers has actually shot up in recent years.

In 2014, there were an estimated 274 million speakers of the language – a 25 percent increase since 2010 – according to a [report by the International Organization of la Francophonie \(OIF\)](#).

Of this number, 212 million spoke the language on a daily basis, representing a rise of seven percent in four years.

Notably, countries in sub-Saharan Africa saw a 15-percent hike in French speakers, thanks to demographic growth and the prioritizing of French in the education system.

Moreover, French was found to be the second most studied language in the world, the fifth most spoken language, the second working language in most organizations and the fourth language of the internet.

However, while the overall trend is positive, the French tongue is actually declining in its European homeland.

“We don’t have numbers for all countries, but this is a phenomenon that is affecting all foreign languages in Europe except English,” said Alexandre Wolff from the Observatory for the French Language.



This is partly due to the lack of foreign-language teaching in European schools, he told The Local.

“In the United Kingdom, for example, French is taught as a foreign language but it’s not obligatory at a higher level.

“In Germany, Italy and Sweden, English is usually the only obligatory language. As a result, other languages are suffering.”

French has also been usurped by English in many international organizations where French used to be an official working language.

In 2006, French president Jacques Chirac famously stormed out of an EU meeting because Ernest-Antoine Seilliere, the French leader of EU business organization UNICE, was speaking in English. Today that would be unthinkable.

Last year former Culture Minister Fleur Pellerin gave the strongest signal yet that France was finally abandoning its protectionist approach to the language of Molière. Although she was then pushed out of the role.



*(French minister Fleur Pellerin, to the right of PM Manuel Valls. Photo: AFP)*

In an [interview with The Local](#), Pellerin – who also speaks German and English fluently – said that she saw no point in protecting French from outside influence like English.

“We need a dynamic approach towards the language,” she said. “Of course I want to defend the French language - but not to the point of preventing any influence from outside.

“We need to be able to understand the world we are in, and that our language is enriched by external influences. French has always been a language that has been enriched by words from other languages.”

However Pellerin's stance appeared at odds with that of her fellow minister Annick Girardin, who is Secretary of State for Francophone countries.

She lamented the use of English in business settings at the expense of French in a [tongue-in-cheek open letter peppered with anglicisms to make her point](#).



*(Annick Girardin, is a bit touchy about use of English in business. Photo: AFP)*

“Businesses that choose to teach French to their teams based abroad rather than customize the language of Shakespeare in France have seen the benefits, including economic ones,” read one part of the letter, which was addressed to the “business world”.

“On top of that our anglicisms are often incomprehensible for English speakers. Is the expression ‘checker ses mails’ clear to someone who works in the City of London?”

This week a study revealed that [French is being invaded by anglicisms more than ever before](#).

French language expert Jean Maillet says the reason so many Anglicisms are storming the French language is partly due to “linguistic laziness”, because many English words are shorter and more user-friendly than their French counterparts.

“They don’t sound nice on the ear, but we use them because they have become automatic,” said Maillet. Few organizations, however, are investing much energy in protecting the French language from outside influences. Indeed, some – like the OIF – are pushing for a more multilingual approach.

“We don’t see English as a problem – for us, the future is multilingual,” said Wolff.

“So learning French is good, but it’s also good to learn other languages. If you limit yourself to just one foreign language, you are shutting yourself off from a rich cultural world.”

Multilingualism is especially important in international institutions like the EU, he says.



Currently, all official documents in the EU are still translated into the bloc’s 23 official languages. But the paperwork and negotiations that lead up to the drafting of these documents are often in English.

Problems arise, moreover, because the “international” English employed in EU business is not always correct, according to Wolff. And that, he says, can lead to misunderstandings that prove to be more costly than translating everything into other languages from the start.

In addition, he insists that the use of more languages leads to ‘richer’ discussions. A balance must be found, he says, between multilingualism and the monolingualism that is threatening to take over.

A multiplicity of foreign languages also brings considerable economic benefits, he says.

“Studies have proved that people who study several languages in a multilingual environment, such as Switzerland, have considerable economic advantages. And these advantages were particularly strong when it came to French,” said Wolff.

He points to a [study conducted by Bloomberg in 2011](#), which showed French to be the third most useful language for conducting business around the world, after English and Mandarin.

So what does the future hold for French?

A 2014 study [suggested that it could one day become the world’s most spoken language](#).

Thanks to a population surge in sub-Saharan Africa, it’s possible that 750 million people could be speaking French by 2050.

“We are more or less optimistic,” says Wolff. “The challenge now is to have an effective education system [in Francophone countries] that is capable of taking on more and more children.

“Another challenge is to make sure that French remains the language of teaching in these countries.”

So plenty at stake for Moliere and co. but also much reason to be optimistic that French language will remain alive and well.