

# France's Linguistic Scenario from Past to Present

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**Abstract:** French has one of the official languages of the France. The government of French does not regulate the choice of language in publication by individuals but the use of French is required by law in commercial and workplace communications. French government not only mandating the use of French in the whole of republic even also tries to promote French language in whole of the European Union. France presents itself as a big country struggling for the cultural diversity against the predominance of English in international affairs. Despite the legal shifting of linguistic diversity in France, some law makers have attempted with the constant threat of constitutional incompatibility, to legislate to acknowledge the presence of other languages in France.

**Keywords:** Communication, Mandating, Cultural Diversity, Linguistic Diversity, Incompatibility.

French is a Romance language spoken as a first language in France. French is a descendant of the spoken Latin language of the Roman Empire, such as Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Romanian, Lombard, Catalan, Sicilian and Sardinian. Its closest relatives are the other languages historically spoken in northern France and Belgium, which French has largely supplanted. French was also influenced by native Celtic languages of Roman Gaul, and by the (Germanic) Frankish language of the post-Roman Frankish invaders. Today, owing to France's past overseas expansion, there are numerous French-based Creole languages most notably Haitian.

Written French began to be used in the 12th century, particularly in the royal administration, which used it simultaneously with Latin. As royal authority gradually strengthened and power became centralized, the language of the French king gained ground. But Latin would keep the upper hand in writing and in schools for still some centuries to come.

French was no more than a minority language spoken mainly in the France region (as a mother tongue) and in the provinces by a large percentage of the aristocracy (as a second language). In addition French was not a language of culture and could rival neither Latin nor even Arabic, whose civilization was much more advanced than that of the West. It is easy to understand why Church Latin kept its standing—it had no rival. And the Renaissance was still a long way off, the French Revolution even further.

During the feudal period, the prestige of the Catholic Church remained great throughout Europe. Not only was Latin the language of worship used by all clergy at every abbey, it was also the only language used in education, justice, and royal chanceries (except in France and England, where French was used for communication between the two kingdoms). It was also the language of science and philosophy. Educated people had to resort to Latin as a second language: it was the *international vehicular language of the Catholic world*. Outside Europe, Turkish, Arabic, Chinese, and Mongolian played a similar role.

For the French language, which was undergoing major changes, this was a period of transition between Old French and Modern French. Middle French went on to assert itself during the Renaissance. From the time of Philippe le Bel (1268–1314), French started being used for official documents, in regional parliaments, and in the royal chancery. From 1300 on, it was a written administrative and legal language that was already competing with Latin. Roman jurists and Greek philosophers were henceforth translated into French, while a literature emerged that was more suitable for a less educated public. Academics, clerks, and other scholars continued to Latinize their French without French-frying their Latin.

In reaction against France, English replaced French at the Parliament of London in 1363. After the defeat of Agincourt (1415), the Treaty of Troyes (1420) recognized Henry V of England as the heir to the kingdom of France. He was the first king of England to use **English** in official documents, and he drew up his will in English. However, French continued to be the spoken language of the English court since most of England's monarchs came from France. Henry V married Catherine de Valois, the daughter of Charles VI, the King of France. The French, if educated, no longer wrote in dialectal French but rather in French or Latin.

French orthography remained very close to Latin, even French had linguistically moved quite apart from it. It was a *French-fried Latin* in a way. The most striking features of Middle French involved vocabulary and orthography. French spread increasingly throughout France and took over in many areas from Latin, but the latter took its revenge by flooding the victorious language with massive borrowings.

The influence of the educated and powerful state scribes and clerks in this period of the French language and the economic life of the nation have been important. These individuals, who were immersed in Latin and enthralled with the masterpieces of antiquity, were dismissive of the resources that French put at their disposal and sought instead to bring the spoken language (into closer alignment with the vast cultural heritage of the past (Latin). No doubt had these Latinizes been more versed in Romanic

philology, they would have sought to dress up words of Romanic or *vulgar* (from Latin *vulgus*, meaning "people") origin, but this was not the case. These so-called "Latin pilferers" won friends in high places, who lavished them with encouragement.

The actions of the Latinizers distanced French from the language of the people. This was the beginning of the separation of the written and spoken language. French lost its prerogative to develop freely, becoming the domain of scholars, poets, and grammarians. If the French king had 15 million subjects, it supposed that 40,000 knew how to write and that one-third of this small number (almost all clerks) found the occasion to read the texts we now have in hand. It is estimated that no more than 2% of the population could write this type of French. The people spoke *patois*, a term used in the middle Ages to indicate an incomprehensible language, the language of animals, or coarse behavior, without referring to any particular regional dialect.

With 15 million inhabitants, France remained the most populous country in Europe and made the French king richer than his rivals, which helped cement his authority and promote his language. There was also another reason why French spread: state interventionism in the language. In 1510, a decree by Louis XII on the reformation of justice specified that certain judicial proceedings, civil inquiries and procedures be conducted in the common language of the country, and no longer in Latin.

The royal decree made French *the state language*, but was directed only against Church Latin, not local dialects. From 1450 to 1550, Occitan languages disappeared from administrative and judicial archives in southern France. The Church resisted the reform that sent Latin to second place after French. It even cracked down by fire and sword on movements that promoted the translation of holy books into the common language. Around 1520, the Bible and Gospel were translated into French, and all Calvinists in France and Switzerland did their best to spread them in this form, to the great displeasure of the Catholic hierarchy. Whether they liked it or not, religious controversies all ended up being written about in both French and Latin.

Printers also contributed to the spread of French. It was more profitable to publish in French than Latin because more people read French. It is the period that today's French owes its excessively difficult spelling. Many writers, scholars and leading intellectuals were unsure of the many rules and complications of the language, and so left things up to the typographers, who were paid based on word length. The typographers strove to make things more learned and complex, and were responsible for many cumbersome and at times ridiculous traditions. These trendsetters sought to express the originality of French, introducing among other things the cedilla, the apostrophe, and accents. It was henceforth recognized that the French writing system was so unconventional that distinguished people could ignore it without embarrassment, but specialists i.e., typographers, printers, scholars, etc. were required to observe it.

Modern French was born in the era of the Grand Siècle (1594–1715), a long period of social stability and economic prosperity that boosted France to a never before attained level of prestige in Politics, literature and the arts. Royal dictatorship in France began with Henry IV (1553–1610). Imposed by the sovereigns of France, French was equal in standing to the "three languages of God" i.e., Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Under the reign of Louis XIII (1610–1643), the powerful Cardinal Richelieu endeavored to restore royal authority through heightened centralization, reorganization of the army and navy, and the creation of a pervasive police presence. Richelieu also created the Académie Française in 1635 with the mission of preparing a dictionary, grammar, rhetoric, and poetics and keeping watch over the French language. Louis XIV became the ruler of France in 1661. All power was concentrated in the hands of the Sun King, was persuaded that absolute power was legitimate, and he represented God in France. His thirst for power pushed Louis XIV into seeking and partially obtaining hegemony in Europe, which turned his long reign (1661–1715) into an uninterrupted series of wars.

During his authoritative and centralized century, the grammarians shaped the language according to his choice. The reign of Louis XIV produced over one hundred of *professional censors*, most of whom were disciples of **Claude Fabre de Vaugelas** (1585–1659), the best-known grammarian of his time. In 1647, he published *Remarques sur la Langue Française*, a treatise on the proper use of French.

The language enjoyed a period of distinction and consolidation. For grammarians French had reached the peak of perfection. The use of a select and elegant vocabulary was to be desired. Grammarians remained very preoccupied with purifying the language out of fear of future corruption, and banned Italianisms, archaisms, provincialisms, technical and learned terms all the words considered low. The Académie Française continued to monitor the purity of the language and published the first edition of the dictionary in 1694. As per the subjects of Louis XIV, words were grouped into classes. Vocabulary included only the words permitted to an honest man and was based on proper usage.

In southern France, the "Patois" (regional dialect) were the only languages used in the countryside throughout the 18th century. Even the aristocracy and middle classes, who had been introduced to French the previous century, continued to use their local "patois" in daily life. For them, French was the Sunday language—the language used at important religious or civil ceremonies. The only people who spoke French at the time were those who had power, i.e., the king and his court, jurists, armed forces officers, and those could write because of having lived in Paris. But the people in the Paris region still spoke the languages of Brie, Beauce, or Perche or non-standard French very different from the court. And here's a curious fact the language used in New France was Parisian French.

French made progress during the 18th century notably to the outstanding quality of France's road network at the time. The language benefited from the accessibility factories attracted thousands of workers from the countryside to the cities, where they learned French from merchants and traders who travelled easily from city to city, brought their local dialects into closer alignment with French. A peddler system developed that resulted in French books and newspapers periodically making their way to the furthest reaches of the countryside.

The revolutionary period stirred national sentiment, including with regard to language. For the first time *language* was associated with *nation*. Language was a matter of state, for the state had to equip the united and indivisible Republic with a **national language** and raise the people up through education and knowledge of French. The idea of a united and indivisible Republic whose motto was "Fraternité, Liberté, Égalité" (Fraternity, Liberty, Equality) was irreconcilable with linguistic fragmentation and differences between the former provinces of the monarchy. The revolutionary middle classes saw such fragmentation as an obstacle to the spread of their ideas, and declared war on the dialects. Bertrand Barère (1755–1841), a member of the Committee of Public Safety, led the fight for a national language.

In language, the state's actions reflected the contradictory forces at work at the time. The creation of a national elementary education system which was not compulsory in 1830 was a liberal idea, because it applied to everyone and called for the use of manuals in French. In contrast the curriculum remained essentially conservative, because all teaching of French was based on the orthography of the Academic Française and the grammar codified by François Noël (General Inspector of the University) and Jean-Pierre Chapsal (professor of general grammar), or the famous *Grammaire Française* i.e., French Grammar which was published in 1823 and adopted by the Royal Council of Public Education. The full title of the work was revealing: '*A Structured French Grammar, with numerous writing, syntax, and punctuation exercises taken from our best authors and presented in the order of the rules*'. Eighty editions of the grammar came out in France up to 1889, as well as several editions and reprints in Montreal (éditions J. B. Rolland) and an American translation in Philadelphia in 1878. All French-speaking children throughout the world learned a host of capricious usages entrenched in rules that did not take into account possible fluctuations in the everyday language and many exceptions formed the basis of grammar teaching.

The numerous reforms aimed at simplifying spelling failed one after the other. Standard modern French gradually became established around 1850. The pronunciation of the Parisian middle class spread throughout France with the help of centralization and the development of communications i.e., railroad, newspapers etc.

By the late 19th century, French was approximately same as we know it today. Vocabulary continued to grow with the parliamentary of the Third Republic (1870–1940) and the creation of political parties, unions, big business and finance, the renaissance of sports, and improvements in the means of transportation, the invention of the airplane, automobile, bus, and electric streetcar. Masses of English words from across the Channel entered French. But the linguistic unity preached during the French Revolution was still away from a reality at least in France. The World War I threw men together from all over France and the colonies. Never before had populations mixed to that much, which did much to foster linguistic uniformity.

France began "cultural genocide" in all regions, especially in Brittany. With the adoption of the Ferry Law (1881), which made school mandatory and free, French was finally imposed throughout the country. The dialects had a hard time withstanding the repression, guilt, denunciation, and espionage that would worse generations of children.

At the turn of the century, with French not progressing as quickly as the French Ministry of National Education wanted, the authorities suggested hiring teachers who did not speak the local dialects. To get and hold public jobs everyone complied. Proper orthography became a mark of class or social distinction. Surely, middle class children were more successful than working class children, who were less willing to base pronunciations on spellings. Throughout the 20th century and up to the 1960s, French governments adopted no fewer than 40 laws on education, the press, administration, and spelling. This policy was applied in all French-speaking Africa.

Most of the legal texts including the law of August 4, 1994, regarding the use of the French language, also known as the Toubon law deal mainly with the language of instruction and French terminology. This means that French legislation deals less with linguistic rights than the promotion of the official French language, perpetuating an old tradition of paying no heed to regional languages. According to the Constitution of France, French has been the official language since 1992. France mandates the use of French in official government publications, public education except in specific cases and legal contracts. Advertisements must bear a translation of foreign words. In addition to French, there are also a variety of regional languages and dialects. France has signed the European Charter for Regional Languages, but has not ratified it since that would go against its 1958 Constitution.

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