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English in France - Linguistic Dominance and Ambivalence

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Abstract

Whenever English is perceived as a threat to a nation's language, English proficiency suffers, and France is guilty as charged. Many people know France as a nation with exceptional cuisine, famous artists, and breathtaking countrysides. What many are not aware of, on the other hand, is that France has the least proficient English speakers out of any EU country. Through in-depth research, literature reviews, interviews with French citizens, and analyzations of personal experiences, I attempt to expose the underlining truth behind this intriguing phenomenon.

Keywords: English Proficiency, Threat, Politics, Lingua Franca, Pride, Ambivalence, Franglais, Centralization, Education System, Germanic

The French are exceptionally talented at a number of things - gastronomy, art, and somehow making the ugliest of words sound like pure silk to the ear. Excelling in English, however, is not one of their strong suits. To any native French speakers who may be reading this, I am sorry, but this is statistically true. According to the latest edition of the *Education First English Proficiency Index*, adults in France are the least proficient English speakers of any country in the European Union. Ranked 35 out of 88 countries and regions, France's adult English proficiency skills are average and frankly below European standards. What makes the situation more remarkable is that the index shows that most of Europe has either improved or already demonstrated a consistently high English proficiency (EF EPI, 2018). There is minimal research about English in the French curriculum, specifically why the French method of teaching English seems to be ineffective compared to other EU countries. The purpose of my research was to identify plausible reasons for this phenomenon and to enlighten the uninformed individual. The duration of my research was over several months of studying both in the United States and France. What follows is a literature review of leading theories that researchers tend to agree on, my personal experiences in the field, and theories developed that may explain why France has the least proficient speakers of the English language out of all EU countries. Before I dive into this investigative report, and before you draw conclusions of your own, I present you with a disclaimer: There is no *one* real reason, rather several that were identified from momentous political events, a population's unwavering devotion to its language, and a dissection of a government's educational system.

French - the language of Rousseau, Voltaire, and love - is no longer recognized as the global *lingua franca*. The title is now in the strong hands of Anglosphere countries, and it

is believed by sociocultural linguists alike that the French still hold a grudge about this - a centuries-old grudge that is. The term *lingua franca* translates in Italian to “speaking like the Franks.” The Franks, as you may be misled, are not the French. Instead, the term was originally used broadly to identify those from the north of modern-day Italy and then was later used to label all people(s) from Western Europe. It was not necessarily a written language, but more so a language of commerce that derived from the haggling and bargaining of traders along the Mediterranean (Kastberg, 2013). Today, it is universally understood as an international language of commerce and diplomacy. French still holds great cultural prestige and is one of the languages used officially by the United Nations, NATO, and the International Olympic Committee (“French Language,” 2018). 300 million people speak it worldwide for Pete’s sake (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2019). Despite this, it is no longer the most dominant language in the world. So, what led to the change of the global *lingua franca* status from French to English?

It is usually dangerous to suggest cause and effect in the social and political spheres, but for this phenomenon, we can place part of the blame on politics. We are all too familiar with the power of political dominance. We were forced to take the ever so intriguing history classes in high school. However, the politics of the French language is truly an interesting case that ties together language and state. Nevertheless, and to your grace, I do not intend to provide a definitive history of the Anglo-French relationship, but I believe a briefing is necessary for contextual understanding.

The Anglo-French affairs are somewhat of an on-again, off-again relationship (“The Unruly History of France and England,” 2009). Separated by only a thin strip of water,

the history shared between Britain and France is as rocky as you would imagine. It all began in 1066 when William the Conqueror invaded England and notably claimed the English crown. When he brought his fleet of 700 ships over the English Channel from Normandy, he brought his language and culture with him as well (Bartlett, 2010). It is fair to say that William the Conqueror changed the course of the English language forever. But for better or for worse? Well, perhaps that is more of a subjective question, but it is no coincidence that almost half of the English lexicon is derived from French - a detail the French do not forget.

The process by which French began to define itself as a stable, internationally recognized language was not until Cardinal Richelieu's creation of the Académie Française in 1634 (Ayres-Bennett, Wendy, and Mari C. Jones, 2007). It became a *langue diplomatique* when it usurped Latin in international treaties, starting with the Treaty of Rasstatt (1714), which ended the War of Succession in Spain. From this moment on, French was spoken in most courts in Europe and won cultural prestige through French philosophers and thinkers: Diderot's scandalous *Encyclopédie* and Voltaire's efforts against the Catholic church are examples. By the time of the French Revolution, France was not only culturally prized, but it was also on the verge of conquering Europe through the use of a truly dangerous combination: military power and language (Djité, Paulin G, 1992).

During the French Revolution, language became a national state of unity. In the country's provinces, people began to speak to each other in French, instead of other local languages. A nation-as-community concept became evident. Furthermore, after the Terror in 1793, any established powers who sought to use other vernaculars to communicate were diminished and French was to become the official language of the land (Martel, 1988). This

transformation was notably recognized in Bertrand Barère's compelling address to the revolutionary Comité de Salut Public:

“The voice of federalism and of superstition speaks Breton; the émigrés and those who hate the Republic speak German. The counter-revolution speaks Italian; fanaticism speaks Basque. Let us smash these instruments of damage and error... For our part we owe it to our citizens, we owe it to our republic, in order to strengthen it, that everyone on its territory is made to speak the language of the Declaration of the Rights of Man” (Judge, 2007).

Furthermore, a sense of new origin for the French was developed as a result of the bloodbath in which for years after the Revolution, continuing onto the turning of the 19th century, mainland Europeans saw the English language as inferior, useless, and ugly (Loonen, 1996). History tells us that politics, wars, and invasions have an undeniable impact on language diffusion. Subsequently, with victory comes recognition and high status, but with defeat comes shame and resentment. To their dismay, the French were about to experience the latter.

France's political situation began to change during the 19th century when its position as the undisputed heavyweight in Europe was challenged. The rather embarrassing defeats of Napoleon I at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 and Napoleon III at the Battle of Sedan in 1870 brought political and territorial expansion to a grinding halt. What increasingly altered the balance of France's power was newly unified Germany's accumulation of economic and military strength, Britain being at the height of its imperial power, and the United States growing in might and influence. At the end of the Second World War, however, a complete realignment of power confirmed the following: France was no longer politically dominant, and subsequently no longer linguistically dominant. Diminished

by its defeat and its government's collaboration with Nazi Germany, France was not even represented in the discussions at Yalta, which gave no reason or opportunity for the French language to be spoken (Wright, 2006).

The spread of English was a slow process that took place over a sequential period of time. For so long, French was known as the language of the respected and well-educated. It was a situation prevailed throughout much of the 17th, 18th and even into the 19th century. The current position of English is one of dominance that will not be diminished in the foreseeable future. English has ousted Latin and English global languages of communication, as Adams predicted back in colonial times. It differs from them in that it is used extensively outside Europe not only as a first language but as a second or foreign language. Furthermore, English differs from them because it is more than a language of scholars and an educated minority, but is an incredibly useful language for everyone including the young (Loonen, 1996). The fields of science, technology, business, trade, and entertainment - especially this last field - have been permeated by English.

If there is one thing to note about the French, aside from politics, it is that they are incredibly proud of their language and culture. I witnessed this pride in more intimate contexts. Every time I mispronounced a French word, and was swiftly corrected by a native (always in somewhat of a serious tone); when I attended local wine tastings and was blown away by how passionately the instructor captured the significance of wine to the French culture; lastly, when I first stepped foot inside the Sainte-Chapelle and was at a loss of words, but walked out with a feeling of deep appreciation and respect for the French.

Of course, when some imagine what a French person looks like, their minds immediately switch to the stereotypical image. This is the portrait of a French man walking down a cobblestone road sporting a carefully groomed mustache, a beret with a baguette in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Also, they may assume that this French man is a bit snobbish with the tip of his nose pointing to the sky because we have watched movies like *National Lampoon's European Vacation*. Americans with no French contact, which can be described as not knowing someone French or having never traveled to France, are more likely to believe media display is a more accurate picture of the French than in reality (Ferber, 2019). Having had French contact, I can honestly say that I have never met a more passionate and proud population. They do not show their patriotism with representations of nationality such as flags, guns, and politics. Instead, they tell stories of their history through music, dance, gastronomy, and art. They have a right to be proud, though. Their language is beautiful and spoken in several countries. So, when English, an entirely foreign language, began to invade their homeland, the French felt threatened, which I believe is a leading reason for explaining their ambivalence toward the English language.

Ask any French man, France has been invaded by English - or rather, American English - with thousands of words and expressions. Throughout the years, the diffusion of English has been so impactful on the French that legislative measures were taken in 1975 with the introduction of the Bas-Lauriol law and again in 1994 with the Toubon law. They were the Académie Française's attempts to curtail the use of English in certain official domains in efforts of preserving the "purity" of French. Furthermore, bodies such as the Délégation à la Langue Française et aux Langues de France and the French terminology

commissions were created to replace English borrowings for French terms (Walsh, 2015). Despite the valiant efforts of such renown organizations, American English, along with the American culture, infiltrated France under codenames Starbucks, McDonald's, and *Friends*.

In current politics, promoting France's language and culture is the brainchild of current French president Emmanuel Macron, who made the revival one of his key priorities during the 2017 election. He refuses to accept that French is in inexorable decline as a means of global communication, as do most French men and women. With his push of Francophonie, an organization of former French colonies and other French-speaking populations loosely based on the Commonwealth established by the British he believes the current 300 million French speakers will increase to half a billion by the middle of this century. Despite his statements and promises to the French public, however, President Macron recently decided to conduct international media interviews in English, and he was faced with outrage back home (Eyal, 2018). Protection of the French language has always been an explicit priority for French government officials, but Macron has also discussed reforms of its continuing education funding scheme, apprenticeship programs, and secondary school exit exam to close the conscious national English skill gap (EF EPI, 2018). It seems as if he is juggling two extremely important yet contrasting reforms.

The reasoning for language policies for research purposes must lead to the questioning of national ideologies, i.e. the beliefs at the core of national policies. English, to individuals like René Etiemble, a former professor at the University of Paris and author of the best-selling novel *Parlez-vous français?* represents an adverse ideology. He believes that

extensive exposure of English to French men and women risk absorbing American values and attitudes that lead to spiritual and intellectual ruin (Flaitz, 1988).

Before his death in 1921, Edward Sapir wrote the following regarding his study on language:

“It is a little disappointing to learn that the general cultural influence of English has so far been all but negligible. The English language itself is spreading because the English have colonized immense territories. But there is nothing to show that is anywhere entering into the lexical heart of other languages as French has colored the English complexion or Arabic has permeated Persian and Turkish” (Sapir, 1921).

Sapir died that same year and therefore did not live to see the immense changes of language affected by the Second World War. Neither did he have the insight of a man like John Adams, who predicted in 1780 that

“English [i.e. American English] is destined to be in the next and succeeding centuries more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the last, or French in the present age. The reason is obvious, because the increasing population of America, and their universal connection and correspondence with all nations...force their language into general use” (Kahane, 1992).

French television shows, radio personalities, music, and businessmen are littering their French with English words into something that especially angers the French: Franglais. The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia defines the term “Franglais” as “French language mixed with (usually unwelcome) events of modern, American English (“Franglais,” 2018).” “Okay,” “Weekend,” and “Meeting” are English terms commonly substituted for their French

equivalents “d’accord,” “rendez-vous,” and “fin de semaine.” Through my observations, both intentional and unintentional, the French youth feel “okay” speaking Franglais. They find it fun and more so, normal. The only moments I felt somewhat of a negative reaction toward the use of Franglais or the use of English during my time in France was in the company of adults aged 50+.

To understand the possible reasoning behind the attitudes of French adults aged 50+, consider the following true story of a fellow student in my study abroad program:

It was his third day in Aix-en-Provence, FR. He had been looking for the bus station for an hour but admitted to himself that he was lost. He finally asked a bystander for directions. It should be noted, however, that aside from some very basic vocabulary, this student does not know French. So, he said to someone walking along the same road as him almost completely in English, “Bonjour, do you know where the bus station is? I’m lost and I’m trying to find the bus station.” He could have made the attempt to speak in French to the best of his ability, but he was too afraid. It is a language he does not speak fluently, so what if he made mistakes and humiliated himself? The person he spoke to was a French man presumably over the age of 50 and who spoke no English, no better than the student with French. According to the student, the French man seemed quite irritated, he stopped for a moment to try to understand, but ultimately shook his head and walked away. The student believed it was partly because he assumed that the French man spoke English, but also because he did not really try to speak with him in French. He told me that he felt slightly hurt by the French man’s reaction to his request for help. Did the French man have a right to be irritated? To change the perspective, imagine you meet a French tourist in your home country and they speak to you

directly in French because they do not know English. Would you be irritated? Maybe even slightly irritated? They are in your country after all. Should they not make an effort to speak your language?

It is easy to point a finger at pride or imply that the French have not yet buried the hatchet, but I believe that the situation is more complex than that, more complex than the politics and history if that is even possible. I have reason to believe that the French school systems are to blame for its low English proficiency.

The EF EPI findings show that the declining level of English ability is led by young people who are leaving school with weaker English skills than ever before (EF EPI, 2018). Interestingly enough, however, English is by far the most common foreign language chosen by French students in primary and secondary schools (Eurydice, 2000). An explanation of this paradoxical and puzzling situation may be found in the curriculum of French public schools.

Before I begin to talk about how English fits into the French education system, I will present the structure of the education system as well as define some necessary terms and abbreviations. After nursery school or kindergarten (*école maternelle*), which is optional, the French education system is divided into three stages or “cycles”:

1. Primary school (*école*) - Age 6-11
2. Middle school (*collège*) - Age 11-15
3. High school (*lycée*) - Age 15-18

Lastly, L1 refers to a native language or “mother tongue,” and L2 refers to a second language or foreign language learned.

I had the opportunity to do some informal interviews with a 64-year-old French woman from the south of France, and a 63-year-old French man from Paris, during my 6-week study abroad this summer in Aix-en-Provence, France. Before beginning the interview, we bonded for a few minutes over our mutual love of travel, madeleines, and our agreement that the French school system can do better when it comes to teaching the English language. When I first explained to them what my senior project was exactly, they were anticipatorily shocked. However, I did not anticipate them being more shocked by me taking on this project, and less by the EF EPI statistics about France's low English proficiency. They seemed as if they were completely aware of how inapt the French are at English. Naturally, I was taken aback by their reaction, fully expecting them to show some sort of offense, but to my surprise, they were unfazed and equally disappointed.

The French woman lived and attended school in the south of France and the French man in Paris. Both are what you would consider "beginners" at English, as they know the basic vocabulary and how to ask simple questions. When I asked them questions in French regarding how long they studied English in school, their answers were practically identical. In école, lycée, and collège they had English class once a week every week for about 7 years. Though this may seem like a fairly standard L2 curriculum, the results are far from standard. They explained to me that the way they were learning the language, i.e. the methods and tools used during English lessons were ineffective. This is a translation of a quote said by the French woman:

"We never spoke in English during class. We were tested in French on English vocabulary and how to form sentences and questions."

There are three main takeaways from her quote: 1) She never practiced speaking in English, 2) When she was tested on the English language, the test questions were presented in French, and 3) She only mentioned being tested on English vocabulary and how to form sentences and questions. This was the condition of the French educational system in the '60s and '70s. Sadly little educational reform in terms of teaching English as an L2 has been done since then, and English proficiency in France continues to decline.

David Eick, one of my faculty advisors for this project, has taught English in France and believes that the education system is indeed a factor of the low English proficiency, but he claims that answers lie within France's educational origin: Paris. Some of the first educational institutions in France, such as the University of Paris (1150) were founded in Paris, as well as the country's Ministry of National Education (1828). In recent years there has been some limited decentralization, but the system is still highly centralized with strong control from Paris over standards, financing, curriculum, organization, teacher recruitment, and training. Most schools are run directly by the State and even some private schools are subsidized and regulated by the State.

An objective of the French education system is to create citizens of *la Republique*, meaning they are world ambassadors of France's motto "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité" ("French School Education - Structure of Responsibility," 2019). When I brought up the centralized curriculum in Paris during the interview, the French man who grew up in Paris nodded and said that he did not remember feeling like he was being "groomed" into a so-called *true* French man. However, he did recall some instances during his son's school years when he noticed a subdued pressure by their teachers, in the form of homework

assignments, to become increasingly familiar with the French doctrine. The education system seems to reflect the way the country is governed - centralized, uniform, and established.

Centralization in France was born partly out of conquest and partly out of fear. As always, the historical roots are deep: French kings wished to centralize power around their capital; the French Revolution increased the concentration by destroying ancient provinces and replacing them with identical départements that could be administered from Paris (Gobry, 2017). As General Charles De Gaulle remarked:

“You can unite the French only through fear. You simply cannot bring together a country that has over 365 kinds of cheese.”

Modern-day French school children are being taught that the “Hexagon,” as France is called to reference its shape, had a sort of natural unity and the diversity that we see today is the result of an extensive process of accumulating territories between the Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea (Loughlin, 2007). The centralization appeared to be a conservative attempt by the country’s ruling aristocracy to answer the following question: how could they dominate and keep under control a vast and diversified country?

The grim reality is that the curriculum French students study in school does not follow their interests. The world is changing and students are not there to see it. Both of the interviewees stated that they generally disliked learning English in school because of the curriculum design. Furthermore, they feel that France would benefit from teaching more practical English communication skills in schools and helping adults build English skills applicable to the workforce. In the 21st century, students value practicality and updated information. They want to be a part of a community and have interesting classes that

combine theory and practice. The school system today is still far from being interactive for students, thus making them resent the system when they should be excited about going to school and completing their studies.

English is undeniably a difficult language to learn, with some noting that it is a Germanic language, rather than a Romantic language like French (The Local, 2016). This is a valid point. However, it does not explain why Poland and the Czech Republic, EU countries also bordering others with a Germanic language as their native tongue, were ranked 15 or more places above France (EF EPI, 2018).

The Netherlands is ranked as the country with the second-best English speakers in Europe (EF EPI, 2018). English is no longer considered to be a foreign language by natives. So, what is their secret? Their ability to speak English well is in part because Dutch is a Germanic language like English, but also because they view English as a useful and attractive language and not a threat to their own language (Berns, M., De Bot, K. & Hasebrink, U., 2007). Dutch school children at the age of twelve have more than a mouthful of English but they are absolute beginners of French and German - a dramatic change from the situation, say, four decades ago. Before the Second World War, doctoral theses in the Netherlands used to be written in Dutch or German, and very few in French or English; today English comes as a good second - far ahead of any of the other foreign languages. A few years ago, in an attempt to capitalize on this change, the Dutch Minister of Education proposed to make English the first language of instruction in higher education; he was severely taken to task by almost everyone, not so much for reasons of anticipated poor linguistic command but for fear of loss of cultural identity. (Loonen, 1996). The position of

English - basically American English - is now no longer one of timidity and fear in the Netherlands. Unfortunately, with the current state of their education system, the same cannot be said about France.

It is undeniable that historical factors led to considering English as a threat to France's national language of diplomacy. In addition, the pride the French hold for their language and culture is well-justified. Their centralized education system, on the other hand, is unacceptable. There is no doubt that France has the least proficient English speakers out of any EU country after understanding how flawed the English curriculum is. From simply researching scholarly articles and reports, I was given a glimpse of the magnitude of issues within the education system. However, once I interviewed the French participants about their studies growing up, I truly came to terms with the phenomenon and realized that the centralized education system is the present-day explanation for France's disappointing English Proficiency scores. Furthermore, there are further questions that could be asked regarding the invasion and accumulation of language across cultures, such as those involving the attitudes across different regions of France. However, one question is the most thought-provoking and I challenge you to answer, while considering the opposing's reasoning as well. I leave you to ponder the following: Do you believe that this invasion of language and subsequently culture is the fate of all languages, as languages have a natural tendency to move and transform?

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