

# French: Lingua Franca

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By Laura Secorun Palet

## Why you should care

Because the world's next big international language might not be the one you expect.

The French are a proud bunch, especially when it comes to their mother tongue. So it must have been hard for them to take a backseat and watch English become the *lingua franca* of the 21st century.

But revenge could be on the horizon: The language beloved by Parisian poets, Russian aristocrats and pretentious grad students is set to reclaim its title when it becomes the [world's most commonly spoken language](#) by the year 2050, according to a study by Natixis, an investment bank.

French is currently ranked sixth among world languages, after Mandarin Chinese, English, Spanish, Hindi and Arabic. But it is gaining speakers quickly and, the study reports, will be spoken by [750 million](#) in 2050, up from [220 million](#) today.

*A boom in these African states could bump the percentage of global French speakers from 3 percent to 8 percent by 2050.*

*C'est possible?* English enjoys an indisputable global popularity, and Mandarin has long been touted as the language of the future, given the size of China's population and its growing economic power, but French has a demographic ace up its sleeve: French-speaking populations are growing faster than English- and Mandarin-speaking ones.

Besides France and its best-known former colonies, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, the language of Molière and Manet is spoken in 28 other states — which happen to be some of world's fastest-growing nations. In Africa, French is the official schooling language of countries with increasingly high fertility rates like Mali in the north, and Guinea, Chad and Democratic Republic of Congo in the sub-Saharan region.\*

A demographic boom in these African states could bump the world's percentage of French speakers from 3 percent today to 8 percent by 2050.



Source Getty

Meanwhile, China and many English-speaking countries are likely to experience a [demographic slowdown](#), which could lead to an expected decline in the number of English speakers — from 8 percent to 3 percent of the world's population. For Mandarin, a drop from 10 percent to 8 percent is anticipated.

While this sounds like cause for celebration for Francophiles who might cringe at the notion of studying Mandarin, it's not time to pop open the Dom Perignon quite yet. Some skeptics think the predictions are overstated.

The study labels all the citizens of the states where French is the official language as “French speakers,” which is not strictly true. Countries like Belgium, for example, have more than one official language and, in some African nations, the tongue of the former colonial power is losing ground. Even in Algeria, [only a third](#) of the population can write in French.

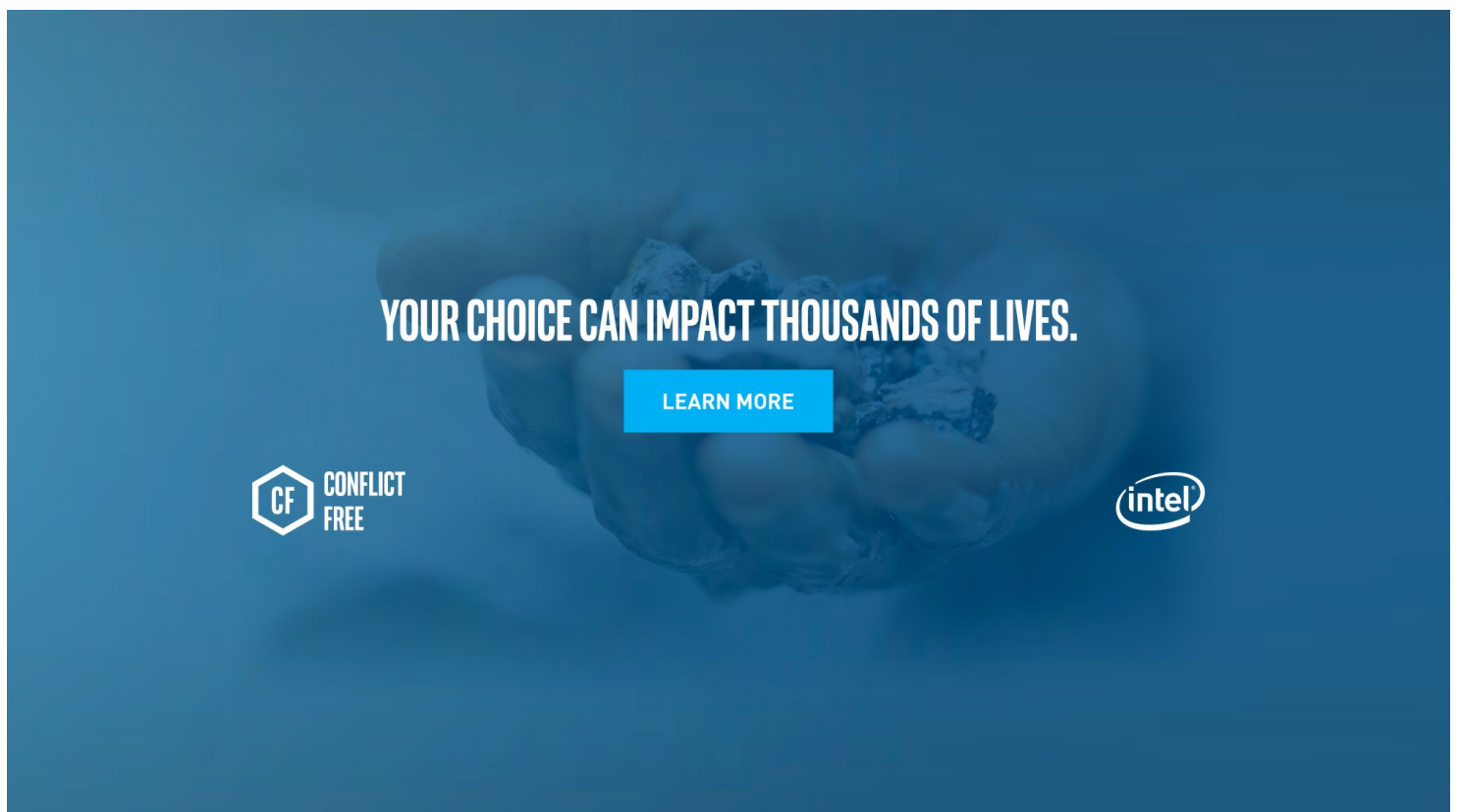
“The number of people who speak French continues to increase, and the projections are indeed impressive, but they do not take into account the coexistence of languages, which is the reality in many countries,” says [Alexandre Wolff](#) from the Observatory of the French Language.

So while French is on the rise, it may be a while before it can challenge the hegemony of English or the growing appeal of Mandarin Chinese. Which makes it a good time to dust off your old French phrasebook — but don't bid *adieu* to those Mandarin lessons just yet.

*\*Correction: An earlier edition of this story incorrectly spelled the name of a former French colony, and listed a country that is not in Africa.*

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