Is the Future Domination of French More Real Than You Think?

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About a month ago, a headline appeared all over French media that I found so touchingly delusional I had to laugh out loud. It announced the [publication of a study](http://www.thelocal.fr/20140326/french-language-be-the-most-spoken-language-by-2050) claiming that by 2050, French would be the [most spoken language in the world](http://www.lesinrocks.com/2014/04/07/actualite/le-francais-sera-t-il-la-langue-la-plus-parlee-en-2050-11496161/).

It seemed like a total denial of reality, of the obvious and implacable dominance of English.But wait, I thought, maybe I’m being facile. And even a little condescending. Maybe it *is* possible. Maybe there’s been a secret anti-Globish campaign that France’s diplomatic machine has been carrying out with patient determination, quietly banking on long-term results. Maybe English isn’t destined to go on devouring the universe. And what would a dominantly francophone world be *like*? Where instead of LOL and WTF, we texted MDR (*mort de rire*) and CQD (*c’est quoi ce délire*).

A bit of a fantasy as it turns out.

The study declaring the future global domination of French wasn’t perfectly accurate. Published by the French bank Natixis for two big French media companies, Vivendi and Lagardère, the study was meant as an argument for the viability of the French-language media market, and it [stretches the numbers a little](http://www.forbes.com/sites/pascalemmanuelgobry/2014/03/21/want-to-know-the-language-of-the-future-the-data-suggests-it-could-be-french/). The main foundation for the claim is that sub-Saharan African countries, many of which are officially francophone, have the fastest growing populations in the world, so demographically-speaking, French ought to out-populate English and Chinese by 2050. But the study counts as French-speakers all the inhabitants of countries where French is an official language, [which definitely isn’t the case](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/non-le-francais-ne-sera-pas-la-langue-la-plus-parlee-en-2050_1503412.html). There are dozens of regional languages spoken as well, so in many of these countries, even if French is the national language it isn’t the most spoken. But you don’t even need to know the details of this study to suspect that its claims were a little wishful.

You just need to live and work…[in France](http://www.slate.fr/story/69533/francais-anglais-angliscismes-franglais). What do I do all day in my work with French clients and French companies? *Je challenge* their presumptions…*je débriefe* my colleagues…*je drive le* project…*je checke* that it’s on track….or that the idea is already *dans le pipeline* (which is often truncated to *dans le pipe*, which sometimes makes me want to tell them to stick that *dans le pipe* and smoke it, but they wouldn’t really get it). What’s the secret to a successful bid? One with *les idées smart* and *sharp*, one where *le story-telling* is really persuasive. And how do people know I’m American? I can be *très to the point*.A new dictionary just came out this week in France, *[Dictionnaire du nouveau français](http://www.allary-editions.fr/publication/dictionnaire-du-nouveau-du-francais/)*, cataloguing all recent new words and usages, and you’ll be shocked to learn that it includes many (many) words ending in *–ing*. Clubbing, phoning, bashing, phasing, speed dating, timing, fact-checking (yes, French media just recently discovered this).The yummiest adopted English words are the ones that in French take on a slightly different meaning from the original—of which the French are often unaware. It’s in fashion right now to toss in the word *fuck*as though it were *phooey* or, more accurately, *flûte—totally unaware of its total vulgarity in English. For example, in lieu of saying “should we tell them just to forget about it?” they’ll say, “Should we just tell them fuck?” A*lways makes me cringe a bit.

One of France’s most famous literary critics and language policemen, Bernard Pivot, reviewed the *Dictionnaire du nouveau français* with a great deal of humor and forced disgruntlement. As a member of the [Académie Goncourt](http://www.academie-goncourt.fr/), one of France’s extraordinarily numerous institutions dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the French language and literature, he wouldn’t be doing his job if he didn’t denounce other new “French” words like *one-to-one*, *le dress code*, *prendre le head*, and *le fake*, as silly “Yankee invasions” describing concepts that could be said much less pretentiously in good old French. He’s probably right.

But the fact is that you could use an English word every time you said anything in French and, while people might find it pretentious—and, thankfully, they would—you’d still be perfectly understood. Maybe even better understood. Using English words says something about modernity, a sign of being in on things, in the know, of getting it. The Anglicization of French is, like it or not, [*hype*](http://www.melty.fr/que-veut-dire-etre-populaire-quand-on-est-jeune-a129235.html) (pronounced “eye-pah” in French and meaning contemporary, trendy or *swag*, a word that actually means the same in both languages).

All of this should fuel the righteous resistance of the French government and its cultural institutions who famously invest a tremendous amount of time, honor and money in protecting the French language. As I discussed in a previous post, there is actually a [ministry dedicated to “francophony”](http://reneekaplan.carnets.liberation.fr/2013/05/27/the-french-are-good-at-most-things-except-english/)–all the affairs related to the people and places where they speak French outside of France–and all sorts protectionist laws trying to preserve the purity of the French language, mostly from the invasion of English. Which, if this new dictionary is any evidence, aren’t really working. More than ever today, thanks to this thing called the internet, language is mellifluous and borderless, and the digital lingua franca is English.

But there is an important aspect in which the French-will-dominate-the-world study isn’t totally delusional. First of all, according to [French sources](http://www.francophonie.org/L-Observatoire-de-la-langue.html), French is already the fourth most spoken language in the world today. According to [most](http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/most_spoken_languages.htm) other [sources](http://www.redlinels.com/2014/01/10/most-widely-spoken-languages/), it rarely even makes it into the top 10. But nearly all the experts asked to comment on the results of the study agreed that while English would unquestionably be the most spoken language in 2050, French might actually be…second or third! Ahead of Mandarin and Spanish (in part because Chinese is so difficult to learn and will never become an “international” language like English, and in part thanks to the demographic boom in Africa). Not bad for a language that one well-known American linguist recently described as “[pointless](http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116443/new-york-citys-french-dual-language-programs-are-mostly-pointless).”

So put that in your *pipeline* and *fumer* it.