**THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE?**

by [Gary Girod](http://www.newgeography.com/users/gary-girod), New Geography, 08/25/2011

It's been indisputable for some time that English is becoming the ‘universal language’. As the number of living languages has steadily decreased, the use of English has expanded on every continent. And though English has not — despite predictions — crushed all other languages (German, Russian, and Spanish, to cite the prime examples, all remain strong), one language does seem to be undergoing the predicted cataclysmic collapse. English may not yet have won the globe, but French has definitely lost it.

The reasons for the decline of French are many, including geography. Francophone regions are spread out: think of France, Vietnam, Quebec, and Guadeloupe, to start. Many of these regions are without direct connections to other French-speaking countries. The result is that many of the people choose to abandon French for more useful languages within the region. In contrast, German, Russian and Spanish speakers are based in numerous adjacent countries, each supporting the others.

French has been most visibly hurt in the last few decades in Africa. In North Africa, French has had to compete with Arabic, a language which Arabs are now clinging to as proudly as the French have traditionally clung to French. South of the Sahara, countries which formerly had large French-speaking populations are making the switch to English due to its relevance in Southern Africa, as well as internationally.

In Algeria, after the Algerian War, French was mostly expunged. Its decline has continued, including the recent closure of French schools, as Arabic and English become the standard.

More dramatically, in Zaire, in 1997, fueled by anti-French sentiment, the French language was replaced with native languages. And in nearby Rwanda the president has pushed for the abandonment of French in favor of English. It is questionable whether any Africans will be speaking French in a few decades.

English, meanwhile, is becoming the most important Western language in Africa, replacing both French and Portuguese. An English derivative is the majority language of Sierra Leone, and remains an important language in South Africa, of course, as well as Nigeria, and various other smaller countries.

Former French-speaking colonies beyond Africa have been hostile to the French language. French has been collapsing even faster in Asia than it is in Africa, due to the isolation of French-speaking populations. In Vietnam, [students have protested](http://english.vietnamnet.vn/education/2007/11/757166/) having to learn French, stressing the need to learn English instead. And in the Middle East, the Lebanese have been [shucking off French](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/Sep/26/Teaching-multiple-languages-to-children-in-Lebanon-How-soon-is-too-soon-for-little-minds.ashx#axzz1POcOEI7w) in favor of English.

French has also seen a drastic decline in North America. In the U.S., between 1990 and 1995, college applicants for French class declined by twenty-four percent. In Canada, the number of French students enrolling in English classes is rising rapidly, while the overall percentage of French speakers across Canada is falling.

Across Europe, French has gradually declined from being the lingua franca to falling behind German and English. English is spoken by 41% of Europeans, while only 19% speak French. English is now the language of business in Europe, a fact which even French ambassador for international investment Clara Gaymard was [forced to admit](http://www.newgeography.com/content/www.expatica.com/fr/news/local_news/mais-oui-french-business-does-too-speak-english-28680.html). And French has fallen so far behind in Eastern Europe, in particular, that it is the third-most studied language, behind English and Spanish.

While once the language of culture, French has been pushed off the global stage. Perhaps the most symbolic example of this was in 2008 when Sebastian Tiller, the French representative at the Eurovision contest, planned to sing 'Divine' almost exclusively in English. That the French singer did not choose to represent the jealously guarded language of his country internationally came as a shock to many. This cultural decline was mirrored when New York's Metropolitan Opera decided to reject the libretto of the musical star Rufus Wainwright (who was raised in Canada), because he chose not to translate his opera into English.

The calamitous decline in French seems irreversible, even to the French. In 2008, the budget of La Francophonie, the governing body of the French language, was six million euros; in contrast, the British Council announced it would spend 150 million euros in efforts to advance English.

In any Darwinian model, a characteristic can become prominent, or it can be driven out of existence. Use of the French language has been globally dispersed, and French culture is without historical significance in many of its colonies. These are not the characteristics that increase a language's chances of survival.

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