

Want to Know the Language of the Future? The Data Suggests It Could Be... French!

For many centuries, France was the official language of culture, and erudition. It was the language of diplomacy and arts. Aristocrats in Imperial Russia spoke French, even amongst themselves, as Tolstoy and many others documented. In short, if you wanted to be educated, you had to speak French.

Things have changed a lot since then. With the decline of France and the rise of the Anglosphere, English is now the world's lingua franca. But French remains an official language in many international institutions, from the UN to the European Union to the Olympics Committee (founded by a Frenchman), and learning French still retains some cachet.

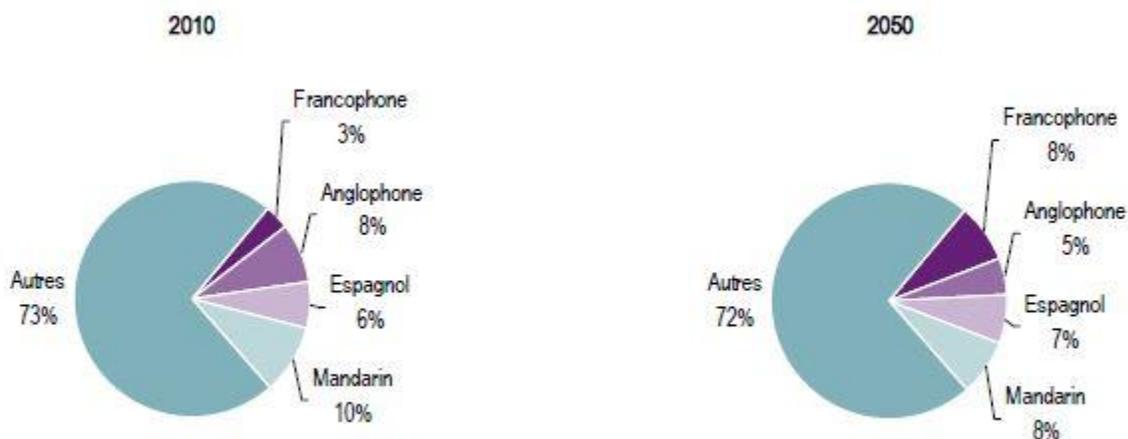
French may be a beautiful language, but few would argue it's the most useful, and almost nobody would argue it's the language of the future. John McWhorter spoke for many when he wrote an immediately viral piece titled, "Let's Stop Pretending That French Is an Important Language," attacking New York City's bilingual education programs.

Here's the thing: the data suggests that French language just might be the language of the future.

French isn't mostly spoken by French people, and hasn't been for a long time now. The language is growing fast, and growing in the fastest-growing areas of the world, particularly sub-Saharan Africa. **The latest projection is that French will be spoken by 750 million people by 2050.**

A study by investment bank Natixis even suggests that by that time, French could be the most-spoken language in the world, ahead of English and even Mandarin.

Graphique 1 : Répartition des locuteurs par langue



Sources : OIF, divers rapports, Natixis

Forbes Magazine, March 21, 2014

The study's methodology is somewhat questionable, since it counts as French-speakers all the inhabitants of countries where French is an official language, which probably won't be the case. And almost certainly, as a second language, English will remain the lingua franca (pun intended).

But the point still stands: French is still a fast-growing, global language. The other mooted language of the future, Mandarin, despite being excruciatingly hard to learn for most Westerners, will probably not be that given China's certain demographic slide. **Meanwhile, French will be present on all continents, and particularly predominant in a continent that, by 2050, should be a fast-growing economic powerhouse—Africa.**

If you were to pick a language of the future, you could do a lot worse.

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The author is a Forbes contributor. The opinions expressed are those of the writer.

[Forbes Magazine](#), March 21, 2014