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History of French

For the period up to around 1300, some linguists refer to the old languages collectively as Old French (ancien français). The earliest extant text in French is the Oaths of Strasbourg from 842; Old French became a literary language with the chansons de geste that told tales of the paladins of Charlemagne and the heroes of the Crusades.

By the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts in 1539 King Francis I made French the official language of administration and court proceedings in France, ousting the Latin that had been used before then. With the imposition of a standardised chancery dialect and the loss of the declension system, the dialect is referred to as Middle French (moyen français). The first grammatical description of French, the *Treutté de la Grammaire française* by Louis Maigret, was published in 1550. Many of the 700 words of modern French that originate from Italian were introduced in this period, including several denoting artistic concepts (scenario, piano), luxury items, and food.

Following a period of unification, regulation and purification, the French of the 17th to the 18th centuries is sometimes referred to as Classical French (français classique), although many linguists simply refer to French language from the 17th century to today as Modern French (français moderne).

The foundation of the Académie française (French Academy) in 1634 by Cardinal Richelieu created an official body whose goal has been the purification and preservation of the French language. This group of 40 members is known as the Immortals, not, as some erroneously believe, because they are chosen to serve for the extent of their lives (which they are), but because of the inscription engraved on the official seal given to them by their founder Richelieu—"À l'immortalité" ("to the Immortality (of the French language)"). The foundation still exists and contributes to the policing of the language and the adaptation of foreign words and expressions. Some recent modifications include the change from software to logiciel, packet-boat to paquebot, and riding-coat to redingote. The word ordinateur for computer was however not created by the Académie, but by a linguist appointed by IBM (see fr:ordinateur).

From the 17th to the 19th centuries, France was the leading power of Europe; thanks to this, together with the influence of the Enlightenment, French was the lingua franca of educated Europe, especially with regards to the arts, literature, and diplomacy; monarchs like Frederick II of Prussia and Catherine the Great of Russia could both speak and write in French.

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During the 17th and 18th centuries, the French language established itself permanently in the Americas. There is an academic debate about how fluent in French were the colonists of New France. While a minority of colonists (mostly women) were from the region of Paris (approximately 20% of all colonists), most of them came from northern and western regions of France where French was not the primary language natively spoken by its inhabitants. It is not clearly known, however, how many among those colonists understood French as a second language, and how many among them – who, in overwhelming majority, natively spoke an oil language – could understand, and be understood by, those who speak French thanks to interlinguistic similarity. In any case, a linguistic unification of all the groups coming from France happened (either in France, on the ships, or in "Canada") such that, according to many sources, the then "Canadiens" were all speaking French natively by the end of the 17th century, well before the unification was complete in France. Today, French is the language of about 10 million people (not counting French-based creoles) in the Americas.

Through the Académie, public education, centuries of official control and the role of media, a unified official French language has been forged, but there remains a great deal of diversity today in terms of regional accents and words. For some critics, the "best" pronunciation of the French language is considered to be the one used in Touraine (around Tours and the Loire River valley), but such value judgments are fraught with problems, and with the ever increasing loss of lifelong attachments to a specific region and the growing importance of the national media, the future of specific "regional" accents is often difficult to predict. The French nation-state, which appeared after the 1789 French Revolution and Napoleon's empire, unified the French people in particular through the consolidation of the use of the French language. Hence, according to historian Eric Hobsbawm, "the French language has been essential to the concept of 'France', although in 1789 50% of the French people didn't speak it at all, and only 12 to 13% spoke it 'fairly' - in fact, even in oil language zones, out of a central region, it wasn't usually spoken except in cities, and, even there, not always in the faubourgs. In the North as in the South of France, almost nobody spoke French." Hobsbawm highlighted the role of conscription, invented by Napoleon, and of the 1880s public instruction laws, which allowed to mix the various groups of France into a nationalist mold which created the French citizen and his consciousness of membership to a common nation, while the various "patois" were progressively eradicated.

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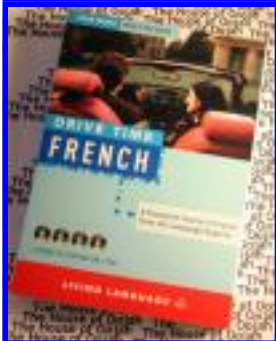
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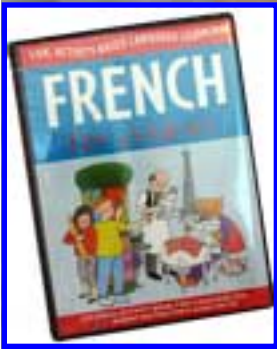
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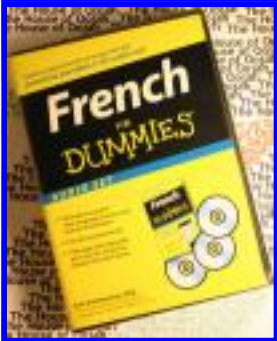
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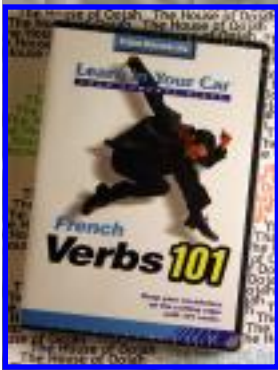
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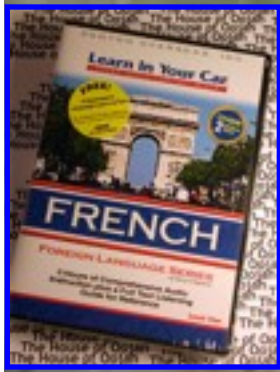
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About the French Language

French is a Romance language originally spoken in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Switzerland, and today by about 350 million people around the world as either a native or a second language, with significant populations in 54 countries.

French is a descendant of the Latin of the Roman Empire, as are languages such as Spanish, Italian, Catalan, Romanian, and Portuguese. Its development was also influenced by the native Celtic languages of Roman Gaul and by the Germanic language of the post-Roman Frankish invaders.

It is an official language in 31 countries, most of which form what is called in French La Francophonie, the community of French-speaking nations. It is an official language of all United Nations agencies and a large number of international organisations.

Per the Constitution of France, French has been the official language since 1992[8] (although previous legal texts have made it official since 1539, see ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts). France mandates the use of French in official government publications, public education outside of specific cases (though these dispositions are often ignored) and legal contracts; advertisements must bear a translation of foreign words.

In addition to French, there are also a variety of regional languages. France has signed the European Charter for Regional Languages but has not ratified it since that would go against the 1958 Constitution.

The majority of French words derive from Vulgar Latin or were constructed from Latin or Greek roots. There are often pairs of words, one form being popular (noun) and the other one savant (adjective), both

originating from Latin. Example:

- * brother: frère / fraternel < from Latin FRATER
- * finger: doigt / digital < from Latin DIGITVS
- * faith: foi / fidèle < from Latin FIDES
- * cold: froid / frigide < from Latin FRIGIDVS
- * eye: œil / oculaire < from Latin OCVLVS
- * inhabitants of the city Saint-Étienne are called Stéphanois

The last example, Saint-Étienne/Stéphanois, illustrates common practice for gentilics throughout France.

In some examples there is a common word from "vulgar" Latin and a more savant word from classical Latin or even Greek.

- * Cheval—Concours équestre—Hippodrome

The French words which have developed from Latin are usually less recognisable than Italian words of Latin origin because as French developed into a separate language from Vulgar Latin, the unstressed final syllable of many words was dropped or elided into the following word.

It is estimated that 12% (4,200) of common French words found in a typical dictionary such as the Petit Larousse or Micro-Robert Plus (35,000 words) are of foreign origin. About 25% (1,054) of these foreign words come from English and are fairly recent borrowings. The others are some 707 words from Italian, 550 from ancient Germanic languages, 481 from ancient Gallo-Romance languages, 215 from Arabic, 164 from German, 160 from Celtic languages, 159 from Spanish, 153 from Dutch, 112 from Persian and Sanskrit, 101 from Native American languages, 89 from other Asian languages, 56 from Afro-Asiatic languages, 55 from Slavic languages and Baltic languages, 10 for Basque and 144 — about three percent — from other languages.

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