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The French Language in its Social and Historical Context

Introduction

Strolling along the Champs-Elysées, you step into a fashionable Parisian café – *Les Deux Magots*, perhaps – for a cold *pastis*. It is your first day in France, and you are cool, confident, and carefree. You saunter up to the counter, smile at the young woman behind it, and fire off a bit of the flawless French you perfected after years of study, your accent indecipherable from that of a native.

Or so you think.

What went wrong? What you said was perfect. It was in every practice dialogue in every textbook in high school. It was in every language guide you read. So why is this young woman giving you the sort of smile that implies amusement at a linguistic gaffe?

It is the sad curse of every traveler that he or she must encounter embarrassing linguistic issues. Even while traveling between countries that share a common language – the United States and Britain, for example – some acclimation to local vocabulary and style is essential to survival. But the prospect of a truly foreign language is even more daunting: it takes enough confidence for a traveler to begin speaking to natives in a second language, let alone to continue after discovering that one's education fails him or her. Indeed, travelers must quickly adjust to the differences between the formal version of a language they learned in school and that which is used every day.

Though formal and informal forms of any language always diverge to some degree, the particular political and social influences on French have created a marked difference between the textbook and colloquial varieties of the language. For non-native speakers who are proficient in the textbook variety, sudden immersion into the vernacular French culture can be a shock and

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can create misunderstandings between native and non-native speakers. This paper will provide

the potential traveler with a historical understanding of how the two threads of the language

evolved. It will also look at political and social influences on modern French and introduce the

reader to situations for which formal French education may not prepare.

From Latin to French

Despite today's stereotypes of French as an unaccommodating language unwilling to

incorporate foreign words, it in fact developed over centuries as a regional dialect built on a

broad base of other languages. The dialect began to gain recognition as a proper language as

regional governments encouraged its use among their people. These early influences established

precedence for a long-standing tradition of government intervention in official use of French.

Before the Dark Ages, Europe officially spoke Vulgar Latin. This was partially due to

Roman imperialism in previous centuries, during which Latin became the language of politics,

commerce, and for some, education. Use of the language was also perpetuated by the Church,

whose texts and services were exclusively in Latin. But as the Black Plague struck the continent,

Church influence decreased, education became decentralized, and literacy levels fell.[1] As a

result, the regional dialects that had been the realm of the common person gained strength

through social use and increased recognition by local governments. These regional dialects often

derived from the tribal languages of invading tribes. While some old French comes from

Gaulish, the language developed by the Celtic tribes that inhabited early Europe, much later

Germanic and Norse tribal influences are strong in early French.[2]

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[1] Judge, Anne. "French: A Planned Language?" *French Today: Language in its Social Context*, p 8

[2] Walter, Henriette. "French – An Accommodating Language: The Chronology, Typology, and Dynamics of Borrowing." *French: An Accomodating Language?*, p 36-37

Late fifteenth century Europe also dealt with the beginning of became an enduring problem: adapting terminology for new things discovered in the "New World." Many European language branches started incorporating words from the Spaniards who colonized America, who in turn had adapted words to Spanish from the indigenous American languages such as Nahuatl and Arawak.[3] As the Latin-derived languages continued to grow through political and social evolution, the transfer of new vocabulary throughout the continent was strong due to extensive trade and commerce across regional boundaries.[4]

The local French government took notice as French established its own identity. Early on, the monarchy saw the French language as an opportunity to enforce local authority and so they took steps to establish it as an official language not just for themselves, but for their entire country. At the end of the fifteenth century various edicts instituted French as an official language for government documents and proceedings. For example, the *Ordonnances de Moulins*, issued by Charles VIII in 1490, dictated that all government documents had to be in French or a regional "mother tongue" that would be properly understood by the people to whom they applied.[5] Later, in 1535, the *Ordonnances d'Is-sur-Tille* from Francois I reinforced this for court documents – in direct retaliation to regional courts that the monarchy felt were abusing peasants by carrying out legal proceedings in languages or dialects the peasants had difficulty fully understanding.[6] The 1539 *Edit de Villers-Cotterêts*, considered "the birth certificate of the French language", tied the previous acts together by officially requiring that all court documents, government documents, business contracts, and so on be in French – and explicitly *not* in Latin.[7] By 1550, the government intervention into politics, law, and commerce made French the most

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Judge, p 9

[6] http://is-sur-tille.fr/histoire/royalvisiteur.html

[7] http://www.lexilogos.com/francais_villers_cotterets.htm

common language for writing, and anti-Church sentiment following the Protestant Reformation

solidified the nationwide breakaway from Latin.[8]

Once the government officially recognized a "new language", some non-political groups

quickly took steps toward defining the language to their own ends. In 1549, a literary group

called *La Pléiade*, led by Joachim du Bellay, published a document entitled *Défense et

illustration de la langue française*.[9] In this document the group traced the linguistic history of

French – all the way back to the Tower of Babel – in hopes of legitimizing French as a literary

language, encouraging its use in Classical literary work over Latin, and demonstrating how the

language could further evolve with appropriate "borrowing" and imitation of vocabulary and

structure from other languages; in opposition, François de Malherbe, also a poet, called for

stricter linguistic rules and simplicity in vocabulary.[10] Louis Meigret published the first official

documentation of French grammar in 1550.[11] Around this time, the French government began to

see opportunity for further involvement in the linguistic development of their country.

In 1570, King Charles IX established the Académie du Palais to create rules and

documents to advance French over Latin in the few circles that had not yet completely converted.

The Académie fell in and out of official existence for some time before returning permanently in

1625. The government renamed it *l'Académie Française* in 1635 as a part of the larger

government-run cultural ministry known as *l'Institut de France*.[12]

The *Académie Française* endures today as a prime example of French political control

over culture and language. When it was given official legislative powers in 1637, it was

chartered to define linguistic structure and grammar, dictate rules for authors, and maintain an

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[8] Judge, p 11

[9] http://www.tlfq.ulaval.ca/AXL/francophonie/Du_Bellay.htm

[10] Judge, p 11

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

official dictionary and grammar. Ten years later, the French government also gave official legal status to the Académie's dictionary.[13] These documents did not immediately affect the social use of the language, but they did become the new standard for education and over several generations the educated populace incorporated it more and more into spoken French.

This is not to say, however, that French was entirely a guided academic creation. The idea of democratized language is a popular one, and French certainly owes a good deal of its current state to natural evolution within society as people adapted the language to their own usages and means. At times, this adaptation was argumentative: two early groups, for example, trying to influence the orthography for their own ease of use, argued over the use of "ou" or "o" in written French.[14] This argument between the *Ouistes* and *Non-Ouistes* ended up as something of a stalemate – both orthographic systems are in play in French today as aspects of both were folded into the standardized language.[15] Debates such as these were only the beginning of the larger part society would play as a foil to the Académie's official role.

This era in history marks the establishment of the French government as policymaker for the language. Though society always plays a role in linguistic evolution, what sets French apart from other languages is the strength of influence of the government in the language's use. Early policymaking set the foundation for increased government activism over the next centuries – though the role of that activism changed.

Revolution to Romanticism

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[13] Ibid.

[14] This is analogous to the difference in American and British spellings; Americans see "humor" in things, the British see "humour."

[15] Judge, p 12

As French culture became more defined, society took the language back for itself. Literary and artistic movements put the tools of language into the hands of the artists; their popular work brought it to the people. Political movements gave partisan groups the opportunity to patriotize language to their own ends. While the government maintained influence, it began to work in parallel with society, rather than intersecting the language's social development.

The European Enlightenment offered the opportunity for French artists – poets, writers, playwrights, and so on – to push the language forward in a way that was most beneficial to the cultural development of the time. But when the French Revolution began, control of the language returned to the government. The leaders of the Revolution sought to unite the country under one culture and one philosophy – and language was an ideal vector for this. The Revolutionary government suppressed regional dialects and promoted "true" French as a patriotic component of French culture.[16] During this time, the *Concile de l'Eglise Gallicane* decided that with the exception of Latin Mass, all church services would be conducted in French – in effect taking advantage of the same system whose earlier loss of social influence allowed French to flourish over Latin.[17]

After the Revolution and the Napoleonic era, the Romantic Movement began and the Romantic writers pushed the boundaries of the language. This met with criticism and resistance from the more conservative Académie, particularly when one of the Romantic Movement's own – Nodier – managed to be elected to a seat among the forty "Immortals" of the Académie. From his position, he heavily criticized the Académie's official *Dictionnaire* as well as its overall resistance to change.[18] This open criticism brought into public light the contrast between strict

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[16] Judge, p 13; Laroussi and Marcellesi, p 96

[17] Judge, p 13

[18] Oliver, Richard A. "Nodier's Criticism of the 'Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française'." *The Modern Language Journal*, p 2

language policy and the influence of people whose lives, ideas, and vocabulary changed every day.

With this, French reached an important turning point. The government still considered language an important political issue: the same unifying philosophy behind standardized French during the Revolution was instrumental in French colonialism. Monolinguism – French, of course – was seen as a "civilizing" influence over the people they were attempting to colonize.[19] In these colonies, the French established organizations similar to the Académie and the cultural ministers retained the role of "creators" and policymakers in linguistic issues. Yet in France, where the language no longer required the definition and enforcement the Académie provided, the government became the maintainers of the language and the people became the creators. As a result, spoken French diverged from official French not due to a lack of education, but to the inability of the government to keep pace with the linguistic needs of a quickly changing culture.

Into The Twentieth Century

The theme of the twentieth century was "globalization" – globalization in both culture and economics, even as governments encouraged people to maintain a unique ethnic or social identity. French developed as a way for a country to form itself around a common identity, but it had a different role to play in a global community.

No matter how well-established a language is, it will inevitably diversify into dialects that fit the everyday lives of different cultural subgroups, whether they are divided by socioeconomic class, geographic region, or ethnic background. In France, for example, regions close to Germany (particularly those whose borders were disputed over two centuries of war and politics)

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[19] Judge, p 15

speak dialects with a strong German flavor. Similar border regions differ from standard French

in vocabulary and accent and such regions may also incorporate other languages – German,

Catalan, and Corsican, for example – into their education and everyday usage.[20] Additionally,

two primary categories of French dialect, *langue d'oil* in the north and *langue d'oc* in the south,

were often the first language for rural people, and in some cases the only language as recently as

one hundred years ago.[21] These dialects were of the same Latin/Germanic origin as standard

French, but different enough to make them easily distinguishable from the more popular form.

These dialects in French present interesting challenges to a uniform linguistic policy.

While government policy suppressed the use of regional dialects in education and required

French taught in schools throughout the country, some regions maintained strong ties to their

own dialects. However, the World Wars forced many into effective bilingualism while fighting

alongside their countrymen from other regions; in addition, when both wars put an anti-German

sentiment into the culture, patriotic French citizens looked down upon anyone speaking any

dialect sounding remotely German, pressuring the native speakers to abandon their dialects for

standard French.[22]

After that, the government wavered on its support of regional dialects. When the need for

further linguistic unification became obvious after the forced bilingualism of the World Wars,

there was a push for that; however, later lobbying for preservation of culture and diversity

inspired the *loi Deixonne*. This law, passed in 1951, allowed for the teaching of particular

regional dialects in schools, and represented an unusual concession to the "dominant ideology"

of the people.[23] Though the government has not consistently enforced the law throughout France,

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[20] Hawkins, Roger. "Regional Variation in France." *French Today: Language in its Social Context*. p 20
[21] Hawkins, p 58-59
[22] Laroussi and Marcellesi, p 92.
[23] Laroussi and Marcellesi, p 96

this was an important step toward recognition of cultural diversity. Still, for the most part, "state policy has never moved towards the recognition or legitimization of linguistic and cultural references."[24]

In addition to regional dialects, colonialism presented the French with some interesting international problems. French Canada, parts of Africa, parts of the Caribbean, and Asian countries like Vietnam had all been "unified" under a common language – somewhat. As is inevitable with such a geographic spread, each thread of the language began to develop on its own. The French responded by attempting to monitor linguistic development in each of their colonial holdings, past and present, and enforce on the people a linguistic policy similar to that in France. They in fact created several of official organizations specifically to deal with controlling French as an official language in foreign countries.[25] In some ways, they were successful – Quebec wrote the *Charter of the French Language* to establish and govern French as the official language of the province as well as the *Office québécois de la langue française*, serving much the same capacity in Quebec as the Académie in France.[26] As a result Canadian French is relatively well-regulated, various laws protect the use of the language, and natives from both Canada and France can communicate with each other as well as people from Britain and the United States. An opposing case seems to justify the effectiveness of the French system: due to a much lower literacy level and without the regional oversight of Quebec, Haitian Creole diverged significantly from French and is now no longer recognizable even as a dialect.[27]

French fills another role in international linguistics: it is the language of diplomacy. A long-standing tradition of French as an international language of court, commerce, and culture

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[24] Laroussi and Marcellesi, p 97
[25] Judge, p 16
[26] Blanc, Michel. "French in Canada," p 239-240
[27] Aub-Buscher, Gertrud. "French and French-based Creoles: the Case of the French Caribbean." *French Today: Language in its Social Context,* p 199

propelled it forward as an official language of the League of Nations and later the United

Nations.[28] After WWII, it was in danger of losing that standing and this represented a cultural

affront to France: a suggestion that they were out of the running as a dominant political presence.

They fought to maintain their position, and when their former colonies were granted seats on the

UN that popular vote kept French as a primary language of the most powerful political

organization in the world.[29]

Consumer media has seen recent further government activism. The *loi Bas-Lauriol*

passed in 1975 made it compulsory for all French advertising, marketing, and contractual

agreements to adhere to particular form of standard French.[30] In addition, the legislature further

defined the regulations for language usage in government documentation, laws, and educational

materials. In fact, over the last thirty years, the French government created or maintained more

than seven official bodies governing the usage and evolution of the language both in France and

internationally and temporarily convened more than four official committees and councils to

discuss and create policy regarding the language.

These modern examples of political influence on the language show that despite the loss

of influence of the Académie, the language continues to be structured and used according to

strict policy. It is clear that, particularly in international situations, the French language

represents an essential component of culture and significance to the nation, and that the

government feels obligated to protect this significance through active official policymaking.

Social Policymaking

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[28] McMahon, Darrin. "Echoes of a Recent Past: Contemporary French Anti-Americanism in Historical and Cultural Perspective." *Columbia International Affairs Online*
[29] Judge, p 14-15
[30] Judge, p 21

Despite the political importance of French, it is difficult to fight against the influence of a society. In general, society is and always has been less conservative than the government regarding language policy. Various social movements in the last century contributed and continue to contribute to debates between policymakers and Francophones.

One example is the issue of gender in French. French, like many other European languages, has masculine and feminine forms of nouns and adjectives – for example, a male *comédien*, a female *comédienne*. The gender equality movement in the 1970s inspired a push – in all languages – toward gender-neutral language; consider, for example, the use of "Chair" or "Chairperson" in place of "Chairman" in English (or saying explicitly "Chairman" or "Chairwoman", depending on the situation). Equivalently, French activist groups have pushed for similar changes in official language. But in French, the non-gender-specific form of words defaults to the masculine form, and the plural form for mixed gender groups defaults to masculine. While non-standard French often reflects this interest in diversity and "political correctness", French policymakers have resisted incorporating truly gender-neutral terms into the standardized form of the language.[31]

French society has also continuously attempted to make French to more accurately represent the spoken language. For example, English orthography does not properly represent the differing pronunciations of "enough" and "through". Faced with similar problems, many French speakers would like French orthography to more accurately represent their pronunciations and usages. Syntax is an additional problem: vernacular French has a tendency to drop parts of speech, and many would like to see that reflected in official policy.[32]

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[31] Gervais, Marie-Marthe. "Gender and Language in France." *French Today: Language in its Social Context,* p 124-129

[32] Catach, Nina. "The Reform of the Writing System." *French Today: Language in its Social Context,* p 139-142

The advent of the European Union hastened the need for linguistic agility, and society has responded. Today's reality is that in business, education, and everyday travel, multilingualism is essential. The European Union maintains a policy of multilingualism and has twenty official languages for twenty-five member countries.[33] Even the United Nations has added languages such as English, Arabic, and Spanish to their list of primary languages. In France, socially speaking, "the idea is that French and other languages can and should coexist, serving different and changing needs. Indeed the new philosophy in France today is that to fulfill the European ideal everybody should be given the possibility of being trilingual."[34] There is a social understanding and admission that monolinguistic rigidity prevents functionality in today's society, even if government policy seems resistant.

Francophones are adapting their language to fit the needs of the modern world and the government can do little to prevent that. Bureaucracy moves so slowly it is impossible for the cultural ministries to keep pace with the rapid change of society. Knowing that it is standard French that is exported to classrooms around the world, one must consider the influence of the ever-changing and evolving society to which the language belongs.

Anti-Anglicization

It is a popular stereotype that the French are vehemently opposed to the British, the Americans, the English language, and all things related. Often, this is true – in official circles, mostly, though also in certain regional and socioeconomic groups. Yet there is an interesting dichotomy between the political and academic anti-Anglicization movement and the social adaptation of vocabulary.

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[33] "Languages: Europe's Asset." European Union Official Website. http://europa.eu.int/languages/en/home
[34] Judge, p 15

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The Internet revolution and pervasiveness of computers often allows English terminology coined by the inventors to follow the technology to other cultures and languages. Often the other language will merely fold the English words into itself, adapting them for spelling and pronunciation. Not so in French. For every new technological term created the French government seeks a French equivalent. While many other languages adapted the word "e-mail" – indeed, in Mexico, one receives *un e-mail* – the French receive *une courier électronique* (literally, an electronic message), informally shortened to *courriel*. However, the Académie cannot control all new terminology. A recent study found that in a third of business and technology firms, "employees often found it difficult to come up with French equivalents to foreign terms."[35] Despite the best efforts for standardization in business vocabulary, for the sake of efficiency and productivity, French speakers adopt English words out of desperation.

Of course, the easiest place for foreign words adoption is where no policymaker has control – in slang. One researcher found that "borrowing from English … has been prevalent among the young particularly in the fields of music … clothes and hair-styles … and drug-taking."[36] Official resistance to this trend is understandable. "The establishment" is notorious for pushing back against music, drugs, and fashion that they believe are corrupting youth, and the French government more so given the foreign culture associated with these fads.

One of the strongest responses to Anglicization comes from Charles Durand, a member of the *Institut de la Francophonie pour l'Informatique*. He wrote a paper entitled "Les menaces de l'esperanglais" – "The menaces of Esperenglish."[37] Esperenglish, he explains, is the movement toward worldwide acceptance of English as the international language (similar to the

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[35] Judge, p 21

[36] George, Ken. "Alternative French." *French Today: Language in its Social Context,* p 161

[37] Durand, Charles. "Les menaces de l'esperanglais." A cached version of his paper can be found on Google. I was unable to find a full PDF copy, but if you can read French, I recommend searching for the cached HTML version.

movement for Esperanto). He is against it for several reasons, the first of which is that English

was simply not designed to be an international language. English follows an odd set of rules, has

no standard orthography, and inherits strange rules and cases from many languages – and this,

Duran argues, is exactly what an international language should *not* be. It should be a language

with a stricter grammar, clearer rules for pronunciation, and more policy governing its changes;

ideally, a more planned language like French. Duran also claims that championing English as the

international language gives native English speakers – stereotypically monolingual[38] – no

incentive to learn any other languages, and if English spreads further, this attitude will propagate

to the rest of the world. As a result, he says, the many nations of our world will lose one of their

deepest forms of cultural identity: language.

He has other concerns as well. For example, conducting technological business in English

subtly associates technological innovations with native English speakers, thus providing a

subconscious advantage to English speakers over non-English speakers. Many of his claims are

worthy of further thought and consideration – consider how Americans might react if told that all

business, Internet work, and so forth had to be in Chinese. However, to gain some perspective on

the severity of this point of view, one must take into account one of the keywords associated with

his article: "Mind control through the spread of English."

As with multilingualism, gender issues, and other influences, the government and

academia lag behind society in linguistic policy. The stereotypes only seem to reinforce what

classes teach. However, awareness of the reality of "linguistic democracy" is important to gain

understanding of true use of the language in everyday society.

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[38] In a cab in Paris, the driver told me a joke (in excellent English): "You speak three languages," he said, "you are trilingual. Two languages, you are bilingual. One language, you are an American."

Applications to Modern French

What does this all mean for modern French? What sort of language is it?

Part of the Académie's early influence depended on the education levels of the people. The Académie, by the nature of its name, is an academic society as well as a political one: it guided French education, thus the educated spoke its standard form of French – it was something to aspire to. In modern France, education levels are much higher and standardized French is still taught, but the educated are rejecting it in favor of their own adaptation.

Society's need for immediate functionality in the modern world drives the democratic evolution of the language. Even the educated realize that the Académie cannot keep pace with the changing world and adaptation is the key to success. Modern French reflects the needs of an agile society; standardized French does not.

Situational awareness is the best weapon for the would-be traveler. A historical and contextual understanding offers the knowledge that:

- When dealing in politics, standardized French is an important national symbol

- Business negotiations and contracts, law, and advertising have a history of policy-enforced standardization and will adhere to official rules and structure

- Though it is courteous to speak French when abroad and not assume that English will be sufficient for survival, it is not the case that the French are opposed to English in all its forms

- Technology and popular culture are more likely to incorporate English words than French equivalents

- Informal French has deviated significantly from standardized French and the two should not be assumed to be identical

While the last point may seem blatantly obvious, it is extremely important for situational

awareness. It is easy to be frustrated by linguistic gaffes abroad and entering situations with an

open mind, expecting deviations from standardized French, can greatly reduce a traveler's

frustration while abroad.

What to Look For

Beyond situational awareness, the traveler can benefit from the knowledge of specific

linguistic trends in informal speech. As in English, each generation creates its own mark on the

language with modified grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary, some of which are

eventually adapted into mainstream use of the language. It is impossible to create a

comprehensive list of informal French, but some specific examples are helpful.

Every French class drills students on pronunciation and accent. However, as much as

English words are often slurred together and not completely enunciated, so French words are

pronounced in rapid succession. These phonetic differences often manifest themselves in

dropped vowels; for example, the phrase *Je ne sais pas* will be pronounced *J'n'sais pas*.

Syntactic differences – for example, dropping entire words – may combine with phonetic

changes, resulting in *Je ne sais pas* becoming *J'sais pas* or, taking the phonetics even further,

Chais pas.[39] The negation particle *ne* is frequently lost -- one study found that the negative "ne"

was dropped in 80% of informal French conversation.[40]

It is helpful to consider these differences in the context of English. The examples above

are analogous to the English "I do not know." We frequently shorten it to "I don't know." Even

in writing (especially online), many younger people shorten it further to "I dunno." Spoken, the

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[39] Ken, p 155
[40] Ken, p 165

two words often blend together even more. A similar process takes place many other places in

English. Remembering where informality manifests itself in English will help in predicting

analogs in French.

Another syntactic difference, the repetition of words, is a particularly French sound. Unnecessarily repeating the subject of a sentence adds emphasis to the subject. For example, *C'est bon* may become *C'est bon, ca* – literally, "It's good, that." Another instance is "Moi, je ne sais rien" – "Me, I don't know anything." This is an informality that has become very mainstream and which can be found in the majority of French conversations.[41]

In addition to syntactic changes, lexical changes – reflected in both writing and speech – are prevalent throughout informal French. *Apocope* is the most widely used change. This involves shortening or abbreviating words for faster and more informal-sounding speech. *Professeur* becomes *prof*, *faculté* becomes *fac*, and *mathématiques* becomes *maths*. These abbreviations have become so popular that even spell-check recognizes them as correct French.[42]

However, French youth, in a show of rebellion and individuality, tend to invent new forms of own speech. They often take *apocope* to the extreme, shortening already shortened words; for example, *maximum*, shortened to *maxi*, becomes *max*. *Pattes d'éléphant* (bellbottom pants – literally, elephant feet) are colloquially *pattes d'éleph*, but younger generations refer to *pattes d'eph*.[43]

Verlan, or syllable inversion, is another trend among youth. The word *verlan* is a descriptive name: it comes from the French word for inverse – *l'envers* – and by reversing the syllables (*vers-l'en*) and slurring the pronunciation, it becomes *verlan*. The French equivalent of

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[41] George, p 158
[42] George, p 162
[43] George, p 160

referring to parents in slang English as "the 'rents" uses *verlan*: *les parents* becomes *les renpats*.[44]

Additional modifications – attaching unnecessary suffixes to some words, or hyperbolic speech (e.g., adding "super" to everything), for example – are also common among youth.[45] Suffice it to say that a traveler should expect far more deviation from standard French among younger people than among adults.

Beyond grammatical differences there is also informal vocabulary. As sectors of industry have specialized vocabulary for the initiated – generally referred to as "jargon" – so sectors of society have their own jargon. The French call this *argot*, and it is effectively French slang. For the most part, *argot* is wide-spread, as it is in English. It will often make use of metaphor, also as in English. For example, we have an old euphemism for death: "kicking the bucket." The French at one point said, "*fermer son parapluie*" (literally, "closing his umbrella"). Such a term is understandable through context, particularly if one is familiar with analogous phrases like "kicking the bucket" in English.

However, users of *argot* sometimes intend their speech to be difficult to understand even in context. Since *argot* is a social phenomenon, the social groups to which it applies may see it as a method of distinguishing themselves from others.[46] As expected, this is prevalent among teens. A disparaging term for adults meant to be nebulous to a bystander is the acronym BSC for *bientôt sous chrysanthèmes* – literally, "Soon beneath chrysanthemums", or, as in English, "Soon to be pushing up daisies."[47]

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[44] George, p 160
[45] Ibid.
[46] George, p 158
[47] George, p 160.

Many other intricacies of informal French cannot be explained through trends or compartmentalization into specific parts of speech; some are simply social creations that have found their way into popular culture. Unfortunately for the traveler, these are often some of the most embarrassing. One individual traveled to Belgium through an exchange program and found herself turning red when she discovered that the word *bon*, "good," when used to describe people, can have sexual connotations; socially, the correct word would have been *bien* ("good/well")*,* though grammatically speaking, *bon* made more sense.[48] Another found that a slight misplacement of emphasis on a word changed the topic of her sentence from fishing to sinning.[49] These individuals had several years of academic training in French and felt reasonably comfortable before their travels, but once abroad, had to spend several months developing an understanding of local usage before they truly considered themselves French-speaking.

These examples are just a subset of informal French. It is impossible to create an exhaustive list of slang terms, grammatical play, or lexical modifications. However, familiarity with these types of informalities will help a traveler integrate themselves into the culture more easily by reducing the frustration and embarrassment that comes with immersion into a foreign language. It is still important to treat these examples as something to provide situational awareness: attempting to use them without an understanding of appropriateness can be just as, if not more, dangerous as a lack of knowledge. One traveler, spending time as a student and socializing in a university atmosphere, attempted to use some newly acquired slang at dinner with the family of a friend and was quickly informed that the word she had used was not appropriate for polite company.[50]

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[48] Gordon, Lindsay. Personal interview. 1 May 2006.
[49] Rynning, Ann Marie. Personal interview. 25 April 2006.
[50] Pratt, Joanne. Personal interview. 27 April 2006.

Conclusion

Learning any language is a multidimensional process: acquiring basic grammar and vocabulary, building the confidence to speak it in its native country, and a development of situational awareness (or "cultural empathy") to obtain a working fluency. Depending on the language, those steps may flow easily together, or they may not. French is a difficult case because of the disconnection between the first and third steps. Although all languages have informal forms and some acclimation is always necessary for foreigners, French history created an unusually rigid, structured formal version of the language. It stems from patriotism, diplomacy, imperialism, academicism, and cultural unity. Familiarity with this history is important in order to gain perspective on the academic French a traveler has learned.

Yet historical awareness is not sufficient. Knowledge of social influences, particularly compared to the political history, is essential to understanding French. All the slang dictionaries and survival guides in the world cannot replace awareness of how social movements in France affect the language, how generational differences in language arise, or how English and other foreign terms are more frequently folded into everyday language than organizations like the Académie are willing to admit.

This paper was an attempt to introduce both social and political awareness to the potential traveler. It is meant to help the traveler know where to look for certain aspects of colloquial usage and consciously adapt these for his or her own use as they are discovered. Despite the anti-Americanism and anti-Anglicization that does exist in parts of French society, we have a powerful ability to redeem ourselves and our country by making a concerted effort to build cultural understanding. Language, as the French have long known, is the key to culture. It is the best place to start building.

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