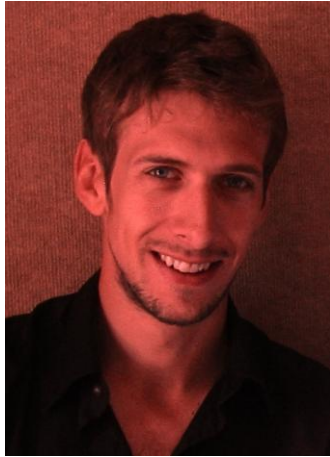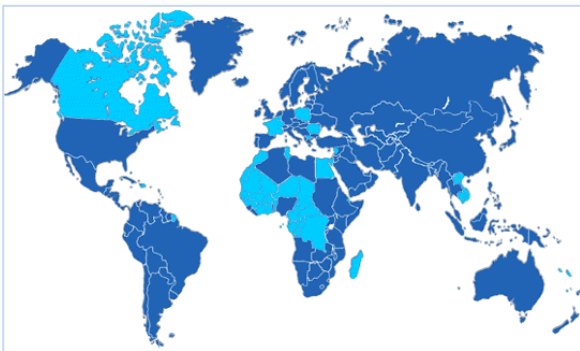# Heritage Voices: Language - French

About the author: David Lasserre

David Lasserre has master's degrees in Teaching French as a Foreign Language and Cultural Projects Development. He has worked in the international education field for 8 years in France and the United States. David is presently the coordinator of the French Heritage Language Program, a New York-based program of the French-American Cultural Exchange foundation in partnership with the French Embassy in the United States and the Alfred and Jane Ross Foundation. Born in Belgium and raised in France, David uses his native French on a daily basis to collaborate with numerous members of the very diverse French-speaking community: association leaders, religious leaders, government representatives, the local media, parents, and students, among others.

David strongly believes in the values promoted by the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*: cultural diversity, solidarity, and dialogue for mutual understanding and peace. By helping French-speaking immigrants in the United States maintain and develop their French, David hopes to promote these values. He also seeks to help his students thrive and enrich their lives by maintaining strong bonds with their cultural identity while enhancing their relationships with their relatives and friends in the United States and their countries of origin. All of David's relatives live in Europe, and he tries his best to stay in touch with them and the French culture through the Internet, books, films, music, and twice-a-year visits to Belgium and France.

About the French Language

In 2009, French is spoken as a first language by over 77 million people; as a heritage and second language by over 190 million; and as an acquired foreign language by approximately 200 million people, with French speakers present in 57 different countries (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, OIF, 2009). Most native French speakers live in France, where the language originated. They also live in Canada, Monaco, and parts of Switzerland, Belgium, and Luxembourg.

French is also the official language in France's overseas territories of French Polynesia, New Caledonia, French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Saint-Barthélémy, Saint-Martin, Mayotte, Réunion, and Saint-Pierre et Miquelon.

Furthermore, French is an official language of Lebanon, along with Arabic. In Laos and Cambodia, French is still an administrative language, and it is the most commonly taught third language in India. In French-speaking Africa (essentially the western and central parts of the continent), French is a first language for some and a widely spoken second language for many. Where access to education spreads over the continent, more and more people speak French.

A large number of second-language French speakers are also found in the Caribbean (e.g., Haiti). In the United States, French is the third most-spoken language, after English and Spanish, and the second most-spoken in the states of Louisiana, Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire. Louisiana is home to many distinct dialects, of which Cajun French has the largest number of speakers. The population of immigrant French speakers has been growing rapidly in recent years, especially in cities such as New York, Washington DC, Chicago, Atlanta, and Milwaukee.

In Canada, French is the second most common language after English, and both are official languages at the federal level. French is the sole official language in the province of Quebec, being the mother tongue for some 6 million people. New Brunswick, where about a third of the population is francophone, is the only officially bilingual province. In the European Union, French is the third most spoken language after German and English (OIF, 2007).

The official community of French-speaking nations (where French is either an official language or the second language), the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, is comprised of 54 states. French is also an official language of all United Nations agencies and a large number of international organizations, such as the International Olympic Committee (OIF 2009).

History

The roots of the French language can be traced to the Roman Empire, similar to other languages such as Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, Catalan, and many other less commonly used languages. Its evolution was also influenced by the native Celtic languages of Roman Gaul and by the Germanic language of the "barbarian" invaders over the 4th and 5th centuries (Rickard, 1989). According to the Constitution of France, French has been the official language since 1992 (*Loi Consitutionnelle*, 1992). It took centuries for French to emerge as the primary language among a plethora of dialects used in Middle Ages Gaul. One landmark date is 1539, when Francis the First's Villers-Cotterêts Ordinance made French the only accepted language for all judicial acts, notarized contracts, and official legislation in order to avoid any linguistic confusion.

In the 17th century, the French settlers brought the language into Canada, while the French and Belgian colonization of the 19th-20th centuries spread the language in Africa and other parts of the world (Rickard 1989). Since 1635, the permanently appointed members *of l'Académie française* (created by the Cardinal de Richelieu),

also called "*les immortels*," have decided on countless modifications of the French language and made repeated recommendations for its proper use. Although L'Académie's authority has been declining, it still retains a certain prestige to this day, and its members are often famed intellectuals and political figures (Barlow & Nadeau, 2008).

In 1970, prominent leaders of the decolonized world (presidents Léopold Senghor of Senegal, Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia, Hamani Diori of Niger, and Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia) proposed the creation of a new international organization that would unite the "Francophone" countries and promote the idea of a French-speaking world and the shared values of solidarity and dialogue. Today, that organization bears the name of *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF, 2009).

French Phonology

Vowels
There are 16 vowel sounds in French: [a], [ɑ], [e], [ɛ], [ə], [i], [o], [ɔ], [y], [u], [œ], [ø], plus the nasalized vowels [ɑ̃], [ɛ̃], [ɔ̃] and [œ̃].

Nasals: The velar nasal [ŋ] occurs only in final position in borrowed (usually from English) words: building, camping, smoking. The palatal nasal [ɲ] is most frequently found in intervocalic position or at the end of a word (e.g. cygne, montagne) (Mordellet, 1990).

Consonants
French has 20 consonant letters, which do not always produce the same sounds, depending on their immediate environment or sound combinations. This is illustrated in the figure below.

		Bilabial	Dental	Labio-dental	Palato-alveolar	Velar
Nasal		m	n			
Plosive	**voiceless**	p	t	f, ph		c (before hard vowels or another consonant), k, q
	voiced	b	d	v		g (before hard vowels)
Fricative			c (before soft vowels), z, s, ç		g (before soft vowels), ch, j,	r
Lateral			l			
Approximant		w				

(Mordellet, 1990)

The standard rules are as follows.

Final consonants: The final single consonants s, x, z, t, d, n and m, are normally silent. The final consonants c, r, f and l, however, are normally pronounced. When the following word begins with a vowel, a silent consonant may be pronounced, to provide a liaison or "link" between the two words. Some liaisons are mandatory, whereas some others are optional, depending on dialect and register. Doubling a final n and adding a silent e at the end of a word (usually to make it feminine, e.g. *gambien →*
gambienne) makes it clearly pronounced. Doubling a final l and adding a silent e (e.g.
gentil → gentille) adds a [j] sound if the l is preceded by the letter I (Mordellet, 1990).
French words are sometimes said to be stressed on the final syllable, but actually
French has no word stress at all. Rather, it has a prosody whereby the final or next-to-final syllable of a string of words is stressed. This string may be equivalent to a clause or a phrase (Mordellet, 1990).

French Orthography

French uses the 26 letters of the Latin alphabet and often combines them to modify the pronunciation. This is the case with nasal vowels, for example, which consist of a vowel followed by an n or m. The orthography of French is often seen as complex and irregular. A major difficulty for learners is that the spelling of French words often does not correspond to its pronunciation, as written letters are often not pronounced. A given sound can also often be spelled in several different ways.

Diacritic signs are very common in French. They are used sometimes for pronunciation, sometimes to distinguish similar words, and sometimes for etymology alone. There are five diacritic signs: The acute accent (*l'accent aigu*), *é*, [e]; the grave accent (*l'accent grave*), *è*, [ɛ]; The circumflex (*l'accent circonflexe*) ê (e.g. forêt—forest) shows that an e is pronounced [ɛ] and that an ô is pronounced [o] (although sometimes, the circumflex has no pronunciation effect); the diaeresis (*tréma*), which specifies that this vowel is pronounced separately from the preceding one; and the cedilla (*la cédille*) ç (e.g. garçon—boy).

All other accents are used only to distinguish similar words, as in the case of distinguishing the adverbs *là* and *où* ("there", "where") from the article *la* ("the" feminine singular) and the conjunction *ou* ("or") respectively (Lodge, Armstrong, Ellis, & Shelton, 1997).

French Grammar

French grammar shares several notable features with most other Romance languages, including:

- The loss of Latin's declensions
- Two grammatical genders (feminine and masculine)
- The development of grammatical articles and generally an analytical structure
- The use of auxiliaries

Typical French word order is Subject-Verb-Object, except when the object is a pronoun, in which case the word order is Subject-Object- Verb. Archaisms and literary style often allow for different word orders.

Verbs are always conjugated, with both regular and irregular verbs, classified into three groups. The indicative, subjunctive, conditional, and imperative modes are used (Grévisse, 1995).

French Vocabulary

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 derived from Vulgar Latin (noun), and the other one borrowed from Classical Latin (adjective). Example: brother: *mère / maternel* < from Latin *mater*; foot: *pied / pédestre* < from Latin *pedum* (Lodge, Armstrong, Ellis, & Shelton, 1997).

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