

The Future of French – The Role of Soft Power in French Language Learning and Use: Advocacy and Partnerships

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Abstract

This article examines the role of “soft power” in the past, present, and future of the French language and Francophone culture in the world and how this global influence can be leveraged to enhance the French and Francophone presence and ensure the future of French as a global language. In addition to expanding the opportunity for all interested to learn French either as a world language or heritage language, it is essential to encourage and support the use of French in our society and to engage in content creation in all areas. In order to both effectively expand French language learning and the use of French as a shared language among many cultures, it is essential to harness new and emerging online technologies in the classroom, the media, the arts, and the public conversation. Advocacy is a key element of the campaign for French and is strengthened by partnerships at all levels among educators, language stakeholders, and external partners.

Key Words: soft power, French language, Francophone culture

I. Introduction

“*Lupin*” has been described as the “most popular” non-English/French language television series on Netflix, and the Manet/Degas show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has been described as a “blockbuster” and a “once-in-a-lifetime exhibition” (Netflix, 2023; How to look, 2023). Both are among the many examples that demonstrate the appeal and “soft power” of French language and Francophone culture beyond the *Hexagone*.

Language skills and cultural knowledge are essential skills in a globalized and interconnected world. While French may not be the most widely spoken language in the world, it is among the most influential and powerful, and is an asset not only in personal and professional life, but also in international communication and global citizenship (Chan, 2016; ACTFL, 2019; AMACAD, 2020; OIF, n.d.). This appeal, or *attractivité*, of French is inspired largely by its leadership role not only in culture, lifestyle, and the arts, but also in areas including business, science and technology, and global health (OIF, 2022; Elysee, 2019; Kharpal, 2023; WHO, 2023; WHO, 2023; WHO, 2023a).

The questions for the French language educator, advocate, and stakeholder include the scope and nature of this influence and appeal beyond sheer numbers of mother tongue speakers, and how can it be supported, encouraged, and used in the classroom and beyond. An important part of the answer lies in the soft power, or influence, of France, which extends beyond French borders and even beyond the 321M in the world who speak French on a regular basis, around the world, causing France to be among the top ranking nations in terms of soft power and among the top tourism destinations in the world (OIF, 2022; Handley, 2022; Marcus, 2023; Gray, 2017).

Within this framework, the future of French can be considered in terms of how educators, advocates, and French language stakeholders in the workplace and in our communities can best work together as collaborative partners in building a sustainable future for French language and Francophone culture in the US and beyond. Key issues include building and expanding the opportunities for the learning of French for all and for the use of French in all aspects of life, and in developing a French language presence in the media and creative arts through content creation across the disciplines in print, media, and online (OIF, 2022).

This article is a reflective essay, written in the tradition of qualitative research and intended to highlight in the discussion of the future of French the significance of French soft power in the learning and use of the French language around the world and in the United States.

II. The Role of Multilingualism in a Globalized World

In a world where bilingualism is considered a “superpower,” the role of multilingualism, of language and languages, in a globalized world is key (Myers, 2022; Language Magazine, 2023; Montlaur, 2019). While it is possible to think of multilingualism as a relatively rare skill and phenomenon, it is in fact the norm rather than the exception, with more than 50% of the world population using more than one language on a regular basis (Grosjean, 2010, 2020). In addition, while many may believe that everyone speaks English and that, for Anglophones, learning another language may not be necessary, it is important to remember that 75% of the world population does not speak English (British Council, 2013).

Multilingualism is “a universal good that ought to be developed everywhere, as it can positively transform a child, a family, a school, a community, and even a country” (Jaumont, 2017). In the US, however, most K-12 students do not learn an additional language – fewer than 20%, and most US elementary school students in public schools – only 15% - even have the opportunity to learn another language (AMACAD, 2017; American Councils, 2017). The well-known advantages of language learning include personal and professional advantages for the individual, along with societal benefits (Thompson, 2016; Languages Connect, 2023).

III. The Role of French in a Multilingual World and in the United States

French is among the world’s international languages and ranks along with English as one of the two global languages. In addition to being one of two official languages in Canada, the neighbor to the north of the US, French is the second most studied language in the world and in the US and has been predicted to be the most widely spoken language in the world (OIF, 2018; American Councils, 2017; Gobry, 2014). Within the framework of multilingualism as a global competency in which all languages matter, it is important to highlight the leadership role of French as a language needed in the workplace, useful in international business, and influential in the world (ACTFL, 2019; NAE, 2017; Bloomberg, 2011; Chan, 2016).

The French language itself is significant around the world. French is the “5th most widely spoken language in the world; official language of 32 States and governments; has 321 million speakers, 61.8% of which live in Africa (North Africa, Near East and Sub-Saharan Africa); has 132 million learners of and in French; and is the 4th most used language on the internet” (France Diplomacy, 2022). In North America, 33M speak French, and in the US, 12M speak French, including 80K Francophones in New York City alone (Nadeau, 2021; Thiery, 2022; Sicot, n.d.). In addition, French is the second most learned language in the world and in the US (OIF, 2022; American Councils, 2017).

In addition to being spoken and learned around the world, the French language and Francophone culture appeal to many around the world throughout history for reasons of its appeal and *attractivité*. It has been a language of culture and civilization, as well as a language of business, science, technology, and global health (Permanent Mission, 2019). Beyond the French and Francophone presence in the world, it is important to take into account how French is used – in the home, in the workplace, in education, etc., along with the type and level of French language skills among Francophones.

As interesting and impressive as the role and status of French language and Francophone culture may be around the world and in the US today, it is important to remember the history of French and its influence in the world.

While it is difficult to do justice to the history of French in the world, it is important to highlight the fact that French is a language of culture and civilization, of communication and creativity, and a language of business, technology, and science. The French have been credited with bringing many elements of style to the world, and the development of Paris has been cited as a model for the growth of cities around the world (De Jean, 2005; De Jean, 2014).

As far as the US is concerned, France has been considered as the first and oldest ally of the US, having played the pivotal role in empowering the victory of the Americans in the American Revolution (Schachtman, 2017).

IV. Soft Power – Descriptions and Implications

The concept of soft power, or “le pouvoir discret,” was introduced by Joseph Nye, and typically refers to and highlights the influence, and appeal, or “attractivité” of another culture and culture (Nye, 2004). France is generally among the top rankings and has ranked Number One in soft power in the world in 2017, and the British Council, Goethe Institute and, the Alliance Française are among the best-known examples of institutions which promote the soft power of their nation abroad (Gray, 2017; Bhaumik, 2023).

Soft power “achieves influence by building networks, communicating compelling narratives, establishing international rules, and drawing on the resources that make a country naturally attractive to the world. The three pillars of soft power are: political values, culture, and foreign policy (Soft Power 30, n.d.)” It is important to note that soft power has been defined as “a country’s ability to influence others without resorting to coercive pressure,” and the absence of coercive pressure is essential in differentiating it from military and economic power. Elements of soft power include news media, foreign assistance, pop culture, global health care, and even the French State Dinner. (CFR, 2023, Van Sickle, 2021). As soft power is an interdisciplinary concept, it is important to include the psychology of influence, change management, social marketing, cultural diplomacy, etc. in any reflection (British Council, 2020, MacDonald & Murray, 2023; MacDonald, 2020).

An example of soft power would be the popularity of France as a destination for international tourists, soft power works from all perspectives, as demonstrated by the French decision to name an airport in France after Great Britain’s late Queen Elizabeth (Moloney, 2023).

V. The Soft Power of France – Culture and Lifestyle: Books, Films, Art, Music, Media and Entertainment, Sports, and Beyond

Culture and lifestyle are the pillars of the appeal of French language and Francophone culture worldwide, and this broad umbrella includes not only history, ideas, and values, but also the incredible impact of French language, books, films, art, music, media, entertainment, and more, worldwide.

As far as books are concerned, not only do the French tend to be readers, but also French books are widely read around the world, demonstrated not only by the enduring popularity of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and with a 2022 book event featuring Annie Ernaux drawing a large audience to Albertine Books in NYC, but also by the fact that a statue of the iconic *Le Petit Prince* now graces Manhattan's Fifth Avenue (Weaver, 2023; Pound, 2022; Italie, 2022; Statista, 2023a).

French films are viewed and respected around the world. "In 2022, French films generated 27 million admissions and generated 167.4 million euros in receipts in international theaters. The box office was up 51.8% compared to 2021." In addition, "French cinema has managed to preserve its place in theaters, at festivals," and beyond (Sponchiado, 2023). "The French art market is the fourth largest worldwide and became the biggest in the European Union (EU) after Brexit and is the leading art hub in the EU" (Statista, 2023). "Recorded music revenues in France, the world's fifth largest music market, topped \$1 billion (€861 million) in 2021, representing 14.3% year-on-Year growth and marking the fifth consecutive annual increase for the market" (Music Business Worldwide, 2022). Not only does French music have a place in the US, it includes different genres across the eras, including American voices and those who sing in French and English, like Joe Dassin, Zachary Richard, Celine Dion, and more, as well as artists from France and the Francophone world, representing a range of musical styles (Demas, 2018; Rickman, 2021). The Manet/Degas exhibit at New York's Metropolitan Museum in 2023 has been considered a "blockbuster" (How to Look, 2023).

Just one example of French media influence in the world is TV5Monde, with 80M viewers around the world and 1.5 million viewers in the US (TV5Monde, n.d.). In addition, RFI and other media outlets report French and world news and events from a unique perspective. Television series like *Lupin* and *Dix pour cent/Call My Agent* are among the most popular French TV series in the US and beyond, and the French film *Amélie* broke box office records in the US for a French film (Amelie, 2002).

Sports can also enhance and demonstrate soft power, and the 2022 and 2023 men's and women's soccer World Cup respectively, along with the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris have all strengthened French soft power internationally. and the 2022 second place finish of France in the World Cup whose "squad is the epitome of "brilliant" soft power, combining style and elegance with acute competitiveness, and projecting an image that is cosmopolitan, diverse and united" (Chadwick & Widdop, 2022; Tournoux, 2023). It is also interesting to note that French is one of the two official languages of the Olympic Games.

Beyond the arts, media and entertainment, and sports, French is a language of business, science, and technology. With over 20 companies on the Fortune Global 500, Paris is rapidly overtaking London as an international banking and finance center and andand Institute of Crypto-Assets opened in Paris in 2023 (Attlee, 2023; Vanham & Gordon, 2023; Thomas & MacSwain, 2023). France is a leader in science and technology, and the French president announced the summer of 2023 a plan to ensure French leadership in AI (artificial intelligence) and tech start-ups in Europe and beyond (Fleming, 2022; AFP & Bello, 2023; Rabesandratana, 2018; Stacey, 2023). In addition, France is a leader in global health (WHO, 2023; WHO, 2023a).

Bernard Arnault, CEO of LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy) has been considered the richest man in the world and is among the richest men in the world. He and his companies, which include many of the world's most famous luxury brands, are frequently in the news, as is his family. It is noteworthy that in early 2023, LVMH used \$47M to ensure that a French painting by Gustave Caillebotte would remain in France, and it is housed at the Musée d'Orsay (Kinsella, 2023; Villa, 2023; Hagy, 2023).

VI. The Future of French – Globally and Locally

As a global language, the future of French may be different in different regions of the world. Within France, French is the official language and is supported by the *Académie Française* and defended by legislation such as the *loi Toubon*. In nearby countries like Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Monaco, and Andorra, French is an official or prevalent language.

In Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Pacific, French is widely spoken. In fact, the majority of Francophones, or French speakers, live in Africa. In the Americas, French is spoken by 33M. It is an official language of Canada and is spoken in the home by more than 2M in the US. The status of French in the Americas varies greatly, ranging from the official language in Martinique and Guadeloupe, to one of two official languages in Canada, and a heritage language in the US, and more.

While the future of French in these many regions of the world may well vary due to local history and present conditions, collaboration in advocacy could be a fruitful and productive approach, including participation in global initiatives like the *Alliance Française* as well as in collaborations among regions with commonalities both past and present. An example of this is the 2023 conference on the France-Louisiana partnership.

VII. The Worldwide Campaign for French and French Language Advocacy

In reflection and support of the position that French language and Francophone culture hold in the world, the French government has launched a worldwide campaign for French. In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron launched the campaign, which has communication, creativity, and education among its pillars (France Diplomatie, n.d.). The inauguration of the *Cité internationale de la langue française* in 2023 is a high profile, visible symbol of the commitment of France to the global role and future of French (Inauguration, 2023; Bouhadjera, 2023). In the inaugural speech of the Cite, President Macron “stressed the importance of the French language as a vehicle for cultural exchange, dialogue and diversity” (Ministere de la Culture, n.d.)

The dual language initiative, supporting dual language immersion programs was among its earliest initiatives in the US, followed by the French for All initiative launched during President Macron’s visit in December 2022 (FACE Foundation, n.d.; FACE Foundation, n.d.a). Other campaign initiatives include the *Dictionnaire des Francophones*, a freely available online dictionary including contributions from Francophones around the world, and the transformation of the *Château de Villers-Cotterêts*, where French was originally declared the official language of France, into an international *Cité de la langue française* (New French dictionary, 2021; Emmanuel inaugurer, 2023; Macron inaugurer, 2023).

However, the worldwide campaign for French extends beyond, to include international and regional organizations, online and in-person initiatives, and the engagement of French language stakeholders, supporters, and enthusiasts, demonstrating the grassroots nature of French language advocacy where every voice has its importance. Internationally, the OIF (*Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*), the CFA (*Centre de la Francophonie des Amériques*), the AF (*Alliance Française*), and many others support and promote French language and Francophone culture. In the US, organizations like the Franco-American Centre in Manchester, NH, CODOFIL (*Conseil pour le développement du français en Louisiane*), and the Nous Foundation in New Orleans, advocate for and support French language learning and use in the US. Other initiatives include the NH PoutineFest, and social media include the *French Maine USA* FB page, the *French-Canadian Legacy Podcast*, and many more.

VIII. French Language Advocacy and Advocacy Partnerships

Just as French language and Francophone culture are everywhere, so too are French language advocacy and French language advocates. Advocacy is a broad umbrella, including the voices of language educators, stakeholders, and supporters. French language advocacy exists within the context of language advocacy and the broader framework of advocacy generally. Advocacy has been defined as “persuading people who matter to care about your issue.” It includes “getting listened to, being at the table when decisions are made, being heard by people who make decisions, and facing and overcoming resistance.” It also can mean “speaking and writing” in order to promote and defend language learning and use. (Daly, 2011, 15).

French language advocacy is a broad umbrella with room for many voices – those of educators, advocates, language stakeholders and enthusiasts, and – most importantly – those of parents and communities and uses many strategies and methods, including those from public relations, marketing, and social marketing, and perspectives drawn from disruptive innovation, blue ocean strategy, and the psychology of influence. It is also necessary to consider language advocacy as a social movement, including advocates with a “shared purpose” working together to make a difference through professional and community engagement, as well as through lobbying and political action (Satell & Popovic, 2017).

The soft power, or influence, of France, of French language, and of Francophone culture in the world plays a significant role in the development and implementation of French language advocacy. The challenge remains how best to integrate the global appeal of French into French language initiatives, and effectively addressing this challenge means individualizing the approach to best meet the needs of specific communities of French language learners and speakers in the classroom and beyond – in the community, in the workplace, and in the arts, media, and entertainment.

IX. The Future of French, or French – the Language of the Future: The Sustainable Future of French

French is spoken around the world, and the number of Francophones, or French speakers is increasing, spoken by 321M in the world, up from 300M just 4 years before, and the latter represents a 10% increase from just 4 years earlier. This increase is largely due to the French presence in Africa. (OIF, 2022: OIF, 2018). At the same time, current and emerging technologies are bringing an increasing amount of content produced to a global audience, which includes an increasing number of Francophones, largely due to the growth of the Francophone population in Africa.

Building on the soft power of France, and the Francophone presence worldwide and in the US, requires both an overarching goal and specific initiatives and strategies at the organizational and individual level. Overarching goals include increasing the learning and use of French. Framed by these goals, it is necessary to develop learning opportunities at all levels in our educational institutions and through community organizations, both in-person and online, as well as the development of affordable and free learning opportunities and materials. The needs of both heritage and world language learners, and of those not currently enrolled in a traditional educational institution need to be taken into account and effectively met. Also in alignment with the goals, the use of French around the world -- in person, in the media, and online -- must be expanded through support of local and workplace initiatives, the media and arts, and content creation ranging from books and movies to social media.

A key factor in realizing the goals is the individualization of the approach. In the classroom whether it is in-person or online, it is essential to individualize the approach in order to develop sustainable learner motivation and engagement. The appeal of the French language and Francophone in so many areas, ranging from a family history for heritage speakers to the literature and the arts, lends itself to this customization and individualization of the learning experience in order to ensure ongoing engagement. Operation Quebec and the resulting increase in Quebec and Canadian content in US textbooks is only one of many examples of this (Gagnon & Chapelle, 2019). As far as achieving the goal of increasing the use of French, immersion programs and workplace opportunities and initiatives are of key importance. Examples of workplace initiatives include the *Oui!* Initiative and French language job fairs in Louisiana, as well as programs in Professional French (Ambassade, 2023; Cultural Services, n.d.; Gagliano, 2019; Tulane, 2019).

X. Next Steps – Advocacy and Promotion for French Language Learning and Use

The significance of the French language and Francophone culture in the world, both past and present, is in itself the most powerful reason to learn and to use French. In terms of French language learning and education, much has been written, but in terms of the use of the French language in daily life in the US, the conversation, though robust, may only just be beginning.

As far as French language learning is concerned, lack of opportunity remains a challenge, with language programs available in only 15% of US public elementary schools and college and university programs experiencing a serious decline (AMACAD, 2017; MLA, 2019). However, the role of French as a global language and its longstanding influence throughout our history and culture are powerful motivators for prospective and current French language learners and for those who speak French and/or have French as a heritage language. It is essential for French language education to embrace a multifaceted approach, employing a wide variety of methods and materials in order to capture the interests of the greatest number of those interested in French at all ages through their individual interests and purposes in learning French.

Encouraging and supporting the use of French is a more complex issue, including the classroom, the community, the workplace, our society, and the globalized world. However, yet again, the role of French language and Francophone culture in the world, both past and present, is a motivator for French language speakers, whether mother tongue speakers, heritage speakers, or those who have learned French as an additional language. In order to encourage and ensure sustainable use of French, not only in our homes and communities, but also in the workplace, the media, and the broader public conversation, it is essential to build awareness of the importance of French in the world and to develop venues and opportunities for the use of French in our communities, to develop workplace and professional pathways and opportunities through education in professional language skills, through the development of partnerships with enterprises throughout the Francophone world, and through a systematic campaign to ensure that French-speakers are aware of the importance of their language skills and cultural knowledge as part of their professional skills set and to communicate the value of French in the workplace to students, prospective students, parents, and education administrators.

As is the case with French language learning generally, it is important to highlight the fact that French language skills are professional assets in virtually all areas, and not just those traditionally associated with French. French has been found to be among the top 3 languages in terms of importance in international business as well as throughout the marketplace (ACTFL, 2019; MAE, 2017). In addition, the language services industry is a consistent growth area in terms of employment and career opportunities (ALC, 2023; CSA, 2023).

XI. The Role of Technology

France is a world leader in many areas, including technology, and it is essential to consider the role of technology in the future of French. Technology can be a major factor in both language learning at all levels and in bringing together communities of Francophones. While distance learning opportunities exist for French, especially in colleges and universities, there is much more that can be done in increasing the scope of these opportunities to include non-traditional students and those who are not currently enrolled in school. A challenge to many college and university students is the fact that traditional on-campus and even online classes may be held at a time that may conflict with their work schedule and/or family commitments, etc., and the cost of taking additional elective college classes is also potentially a challenge.

In addition, online courses are not as frequently available to those not currently enrolled in an educational institution, and many prospective learners may be left without an opportunity to begin or continue to develop their French language skills. Responses to these challenges include development of more free or low-cost asynchronous courses and the development of more open online educational resources (OERs). Opportunities to develop French language skills online also include French classes, conversation groups, and other activities and events sponsored by local and community organizations, typically free or low-cost. Another aspect of technology in language learning has been the inclusion of new and emerging technologies, including videoconferencing and, more recently, artificial intelligence (AI).

The role of technology is also important in language use, especially in terms of bringing together Frenchspeakers who may be geographically dispersed or who may have very specific, or niche, areas of interest. Technology can bring together French-speakers from the same region of the world, or with a shared interest, or can bring Francophones together for social and cultural events. The role of technology extends also to the workplace, as there are opportunities to work remotely in French. Virtual job fairs are just one way of supporting and maximizing the use of French in the workplace along with opportunities for those with French language skills.

Content creation is key in all areas, whether in terms of online courses and OERs, of resources on French language and Francophone culture, and – perhaps most importantly – in terms of the creative and performing arts, bring media and entertainment to French-speaking communities and beyond (OIF, 2022).

XII. Conclusions

The opening of the *Cité internationale de la langue française* at the *Château de Villers-Cotterêts* marks a key moment in the history of French as a global language. In considering the future of French, it is essential to consider both the *attractivité*, or appeal or soft power, of French language and culture in the world, as well as the needs of the local community of Francophones, Francophiles, and French language educators, stakeholders, and enthusiasts. In addition, it is necessary to consider the range of French language skills and of purpose among French language learners, Francophiles, and Francophones, along with the best methods of increasing French language skills, the use of French in a variety of environments, and interest and engagement in the French-speaking world. On the international level, cultural diplomacy plays a significant important role, with cultural activity including media, entertainment, and lifestyle, along with opportunities for cultural encounters, exchanges, and experiences of critical importance of building and sustaining motivation and language use.

The shared use of French among so many cultures around the world is an inspirational piece of its past, present, and future. Future possibilities include not only the shared language and values of our past and present, but also the challenges of our online and digital future. Learning, communication, and creativity – pillars of the French strategy for the French language in the world (France Diplomacy, 2022; France Diplomatie, n.d.). The opportunity to learn French must be available to all interested – world language learners and heritage speakers of all ages, and accessible to all – online, in-person, and in our schools and communities.

Online opportunities for language learning and use, and community connections and career pathways, are essential. Content creation in French and on French and Francophone themes is key, ranging from online courses and resources to online conversation and events, and to media, scholarly, and creative content. It is this latter that will both demonstrate the scope of French language and Francophone culture and ensure its continued vibrancy in the US and around the world.

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