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French: The language of diplomacy in Europe from the seventeenth to twentieth century

French Beginnings

French, like its romantic counterparts Spanish and Italian, has its roots in Latin, and the development of French as a language of administration and diplomacy followed its development from Latin as it evolved gradually into its own language and became internationally influential.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, like the rest of Europe, France's language and culture were heavily dominated by the presence of the Catholic Church. Latin was not only the language of communication within the Church, but it was also exclusively used in philosophy and the sciences. Latin was the language of educated individuals. As in all other romance languages, Latin words were adopted into French and contributed strongly to the development/evolution of the language. For example, the French word *bien* 'good' is similar to its Latin root, *bene*. Likewise, the relation between the following familiar words in the two languages can be seen:

corpus 'body' (Latin) → *corps* (French)

deus 'god' (Latin) → *dieu* (French)

During the 13th and 14th centuries, French began to emerge as a language of its own. The French of this period, called *françois*, was beginning to be used more widely in place of Latin for official purposes. This *lingua gallica* competed with Latin and eventually overpowered the previously dominant language as the language of choice for administrative purposes. More and more documents were translated into "françois" and it was in this way

that French began to evolve into its own language, separately spoken yet still similarly written to Latin.

The Influence of French

As early as the 13th century, "françois" was already used and taught in England. Knowledge of French was desirable, and it was considered sophisticated to have knowledge of French in one's education. French was considered polite and was associated with high society. By the middle of the 14th century, French was the most widely spoken language in Europe, and one can consider this influence as the earliest beginnings of French as a diplomatic language. As a result of the Hundred Years' War, French was rejected by England, replaced as a result of the a nationalistic view that only English should be used for official affairs. However, French continued to be used despite intentions to ban it from judiciary practices.

French as a National and International Language

In 1539, François the First (*François 1er*) passed an important ordinance in the history of the French language: The Villers-Cotterêts Ordinance decreed that all French administrative documents must be in French. This ordinance was a crucial turning point in the French language, making it an official language and creating a sense of nationalism within the country. From 1550 through the 19th century, when France was the leading European power, the French language flourished and was spoken throughout the world. For this reason, by the 17th century French had become a language of diplomacy and international relations.

French has endeavored to maintain its place as the diplomatic language of the world, but other languages, namely English, have quickly gained importance in diplomatic matters. The French Academy fought in the 20th century to keep French as the international language of diplomacy, but French has been replaced by English as the international language of communication. However, French, along with English, continues to play an important role as the language of international institutions such as the UN, UNESCO, NATO, and the

Universal Postal Union. French has had a rich and influential evolution, drawing from its Latin roots and becoming known as the *lingua gallica* in the 13th and 14th centuries, and eventually overpowering Latin as the most widely used and learned language in Europe, and French continues to play an integral part as an internationally used language in global affairs..

French in diplomacy

French was the lingua franca of European literature in the 18th century, and French was the language of diplomacy in Europe from the 17th century, until its recent replacement by English, and as a result is still a working language of international institutions and is seen on documents ranging from airmail letters to passports. For many years, until the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark joined the European Economic Community 1973, French and German were the only official working languages of the organization.

French was also the language used among the educated in many cosmopolitan cities across the Middle East and North Africa. This was true in cities such as Cairo, around the turn of the 20th century until World War II. This is still true in the former French colonies of the Maghreb, where French is particularly important in the economic capitals like Algiers, Casablanca and Tunis. Until the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon, French was the language used by the Christian members of the upper classes of Lebanese society. Moreover, French is still a lingua franca in Western and Central African countries (where it often enjoys official status), a remnant of the colonial rule of France and Belgium. These African countries, together with several other countries throughout the world, are members of the Francophonie. French is the sole official language of the Universal Postal Union, and English was only added as a working language in 1994.

French was widely used in international diplomacy for two main reasons: first, France used to be a major political power. It was commonly used in the whole of Europe from the 18th century, with the reign of Louis XIV. Later, Napoleon "helped" the language spread

even further. The use of French in international treaties began to decline with the emerging influence of the USA after the First World War; in fact, the Treaty of Versailles was written both in English and in French.

The second main reason for the use of French in international diplomacy is that it is a language of clarity and precision: it uses many more determiners, adverbs, conjunctions, and the like to link parts of sentences and clarify their relationships. This helps account for the *foisonnement* ‘expansion’ phenomenon in translation from English to French, with the French translation extending on average 15% longer than the source text. Conversely, English is more likely to create ambiguity and its concision can be seen as bluntness, which was described in the programme as “the enemy of polite discourse.” Nowadays, despite the French language losing much of its prestige, the English diplomatic vocabulary is still haunted by numerous French ghosts: *regime*, *coup*, *etiquette*, *rapprochement*.

France and francophony

France’s cultural influence, a major factor in its impact on the international scene, has been the object of policy reforms designed to promote French works and ideas abroad, primarily through the French language, as well as establishing a cooperation policy with the poorest countries with the view to promoting cultural and linguistic diversity. In particular, this policy centres on an initiative of the Deputy Minister for Cooperation, Development, and French-speaking Communities. Apart from furthering the French language, its purpose consists in developing values common to all countries sharing this language, a space comprising 181.5 million individuals without allowing for the 82.6 million who are learning French.

The French Government is relying on its network of *lycées* and approved establishments, cultural centers, the *alliances françaises*, foreign institutes and research centers to push through this initiative. It also operates through the multilateral French-

speaking communities that constitute a worldwide cultural exchange forum. Since the Moncton and Beyrouth summits hosting 56 heads of State and governments of countries where French co-exists alongside the national language, the International Organisation of French-speaking Communities - that is in French, the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF) has acquired a more powerful international image likely to give clear-cut political objectives such as providing democracy with strong roots, promoting cultural diversity and an interdependent and sustainable development.

Conclusion

French, having undergone a rich and influential evolution, drawing from its Latin roots and becoming known as the *lingua gallica* in the 13th and 14th centuries, eventually overpowering Latin as the most widely used and learned language in Europe. French enjoyed a strong influence in Europe and officially became a national language within France in 1539 through the of the Villers-Cotterêts Ordinance by François the First.

The French language united France in a nationalistic spirit while becoming the most influential European diplomatic language in the 17th century. French gained international recognition as the primary international language for diplomacy and international relations, and only recently was replaced by English as the official diplomatic language. Nevertheless, French continues to play an integral role internationally as a language of global affairs.

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