The origins of French

The units *The origins of French* and *English and its relationship with French*, which are aimed at general French learners, contain a brief survey of the principal historical and linguistic phenomena that have helped shape French and English. These units have two fundamental aims. First, through demonstrating the relevance of such knowledge to the student's language experience, to stimulate a greater interest in and capacity for learning about language, something which can in turn contribute to the development of linguistic competence. And second, in highlighting areas of similarity and difference in the two languages, to give students a clearer idea of the nature and extent of learning required when approaching French from an English speaker's perspective.

For further information on the origins of French and English, see the relevant sections of the *Reference books* sheet also available on the RealFrench.net homepage. This list may also be treated as a select bibliography for the units.

1 Introduction

6000 BC – 3000 BC

French is part of a group of languages known as *Romance* languages (also including also Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian) because they are descended from Latin, the language of the ancient Romans. This contrasts with English, which is classified as a *Germanic* language (also including German, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish etc.). The two other principal language groups in Europe are Slav (Russian, Polish, Czech, Bulgarian etc.) and Celtic (Welsh, Scots Gaelic, Irish, Breton etc.).

Although there are great differences between these language groups, they all nevertheless derive from the same family of languages called *Indo-European* languages, also including languages such as Hindi, Urdu and Bengali. These languages are thought to have originated around the Black Sea (modern-day Ukraine) around 6000 BC, before population movements, possibly for environmental reasons such as climate change or exhaustion of pastures, caused the dispersion throughout Asia and Europe during the millennium 4000 BC – 3000 BC. Because of this dispersion, subgroups of Indo-European languages began to develop in isolation, causing the formation of the various groups mentioned above.

French owes its existence to a number of ancient languages. These include:

- Gaulish, the language of the Celtic peoples (of which the fictional Asterix the Gaul was one) who inhabited primarily the territory of what is now modern-day France, prior to the Roman invasions.
- Latin, the language of the invading Romans.
- Frankish, the language of the Germanic peoples who occupied this territory after the fall of the Roman Empire, and who gave France its name.
- Old Norse, the language of the Vikings, who occupied many of the coastal and in-land navigable areas of northern France before being granted the area now known as Normandy (meaning "Land of the Norsemen").

2 The influence of Gaulish

3000 BC onwards

The influence of Gaulish on the development of modern French via Latin is confined in the main to place names (for example Rheims gets its name from

"Remis", home of the tribe known as the "Remi", and this is true for many French towns ending in *-s*); principal rivers such as the Seine, Loire and Rhône; and certain words relating to features of daily life in a rural community, such as *mouton* (*sheep*), *charrue* (*plough*), *bruyère* (*heather*) and *chêne* (*oak*). Of course there is a Celtic language related to Gaulish that is still spoken today, and that is Breton. However, this does not stem directly from Gaulish, but from the language of the Celtish Britons, many of whom fled to the North-West part of Gaul between 430 and 600 AD in the wake of the Anglo-Saxon invasions of Britain, hence the name *Bretagne* or *Britanny*.

Why do the French say *quatre-vingts*?

Another Celtic influence can be found in the system of counting. French originally used numbers such as *deux vingts* (40), *trois vingts* (60), *trois vingts et dix* (70), *quatre vingts* (80), *quatre vingt et dix* (90), *six vingts* (120) and so on. This system came directly from Gaulish, and is akin to the Welsh number system involving numbers such as *deugain* for forty and *trigain* for sixty, and the antiquated English system involving *two score* and *three score* etc. Modern French has retained *soixante-dix*, *quatre-vingts*, and *quatre-vingt dix*. Where Germanic influence was stronger such as Belgium and Switzerland French speakers say *septante* and *nonante*, and *huitante* is used in Switzerland.

3 The influence of Latin

124 BC – 400 AD

It is from Latin that French derives the most. France was originally occupied by the Romans in two waves. The first invasions occurred between 124 BC and 118 BC where the Romans took control of South-Eastern France, whilst between 58 BC and 52 BC Julius Caesar undertook the conquest of the remaining Northern and Western parts of Gaul. The most significant aspect of Latin influence on French lies in the area of vocabulary. The majority of the most commonly used words in French today - including the grammatical words like articles, auxiliaries and prepositions, and the most common nouns, adjectives and verbs - can be traced in an unbroken line of descent from Latin. For example, *à* derives from the Latin *ad*; *de* from *de*; *et* from *et*; *où* from *aut*; *aimer* from *amare*; *faire* from *facere*; *avoir* from *habere*; *livre* from *liber*; *porte* from *porta*; *tu*, *nous* and *vous* from *tu*, *nos* and *vos*; *bon* from *bonus*; and *bien* and *mal* from *bene* and *male*. Beyond this core vocabulary, the great majority of words in the broader French lexicon stem from Latin, although many of these words were adopted or coined at later stages in the development of French.

Why does French have agreements?

Latin did not only have an influence on the words making up the French language, but also on the way in which these words worked. Broadly speaking there are two ways in which languages can indicate the role that words are playing in a given sentence. One is through using word endings and agreements (called "inflections"), so that an ending on a noun tells us whether it is the subject or object of a sentence, or an ending on an adjective tells us the noun it refers to, and so on. The other way, typical of English, is through relying on word order and prepositions, so that nouns directly following the verb are generally direct object, and so on. The system that we see in French today has its origin in Latin, even if it has been hugely simplified. Latin had a highly complex system of inflections involving six cases:

nominative – subject	genitive – possession
vocative - for addressing a person	dative – indirect object i.e. *to*, *from*
accusative - direct object	ablative - *by*, *with*

There were also five declensions (sets of endings for each case), and three genders (masculine, feminine and neuter). In Old French (the term used for French during the period 840–1400) the number of cases had been reduced to two: nominative (including the vocative) and oblique (a merger of accusative, genetive, dative and ablative functions). The number of declensions and genders remained the same. For example, the word for *wall* in Old French was *murs* and it followed the first masculine declension:

	singular	*plural*
nominative	murs	mur
oblique	mur	murs

Why does French use *s* in the plural?

Because the nominative endings for each declension were very different from each other whilst the oblique endings were quite similar, people tended for simplicity to use the oblique endings for both nominative and oblique cases. As such, the oblique inflection pattern, containing an *s* in the plural, became the standard paradigm for most nouns, while the nominative inflection pattern for the most part fell into disuse, hence the *s* plural in modern French. Certain masculine proper nouns such as *Georges* and *Jacques*, however, retain an *s* in their singular form, characteristic of the nominative / vocative case because proper nouns were most commonly used as a vocative (i.e. a term of address). By contrast in most contexts in modern French proper nouns do not take an *s* in the plural, e.g. *les Dupont*, *deux Renault*. In the case of some common nouns both the nominative and oblique forms were retained and each became a separate word, for example: *sire*, *seigneur*; *copain*, *compagnon*; *gars*, *garçon*; and the pronoun *on* and *homme*.

Irregular plurals generally arose for phonetic reasons. With words such as *cheval* ending *–l*, for example, the final *–l* was often transformed into a *–u* giving the plural *–us*, e.g. *chevaus*. During the Middle Ages copyists replaced *–us* endings with *–x* as a shorthand, but the *u* pronunciation retained. In time the abbreviative purpose of the *–x* was forgotten, the letter *u* was re-established behind the *x* (wrongly interpreted as the letter *x*) giving the modern plural *–aux* as in *chevaux*.

Origin of adjective agreements

Like nouns, adjective endings also have their basis in Latin. The development of adjective endings follows a similar pattern to noun endings, the oblique forms of the first and second-declension adjectives involving the addition of *-e* in the feminine and *-s* in the plural surviving into modern French. The third declension did not originally involve the addition of any ending in the feminine, but in the later Middle Ages it came into line with the first and second-declension paradigm for reasons of simplicity. However, in certain words the old third-declension case still survives, as in *grand-mère* or in the name *Rochefort*.

Why are all French nouns masculine or feminine?

As far as gender is concerned, modern French masculine and feminine words generally derive their gender from Latin, although in certain cases gender has changed. Nouns in Latin, in common with Germanic and other ancient languages, had three genders, masculine, feminine and neuter. This gender is said to be "grammatical", because it is ascribed regardless of any notion of biological gender. For example, the Latin word *tabula*, like its French equivalent *une table*, is feminine even though there is no natural reason why this should be so. Grammatical gender stems from the language of the Indo-European peoples, who considered certain inanimates such as *earth*, *moon* and *fire* to have dynamic force. Such inanimates were made masculine or feminine according

to their cultural beliefs on natural gender qualities, while inanimates not considered to possess such dynamism were made neuter.

Three genders existed for a time in Old French, but the smaller number of neuter words generally became assimilated into a masculine or feminine framework. The usual tendency was for neuter words to become masculine (a trend that existed in French even before the development of Old French). Thus the singular neuter word *bràcchium* meaning *arm* became *bras*, which is masculine in modern French. Occasionally however words were taken from plural neuter words ending *-a*, which by analogy with existing feminine words ending *-a* became feminine. Thus the plural neuter word *bràcchia* meaning *stroke* became *brasse* which is feminine in modern French.

Why did the case system in French disappear?

It has been mentioned that modern French is no longer characterized by the case systems prevalent in its ancestors Latin and Old French. The reason for this is the fact that the Old French case system was extremely uneven. With second-declension masculine words there were clear differences between the nominative and oblique forms, but with first-declension feminine words there were no such differences. Because of this, speakers began increasingly to rely on word-order rather than on inflection to dictate a word's function in a sentence, with the result that the case system fell into disuse. For example, inversion of subject and verb was much more common in Old French and only occurs in modern French in more formal contexts after words such as *encore*, *à peine* and *peut-être*. As such French developed into a language where, as in English, word-order plays an important grammatical function.

Origin of the articles in French

Another significant import from Latin was the articles. Latin did not originally have any words for expressing *the*, *a* and so on, but with the weakening of the case system, more explicit expression was needed. As such the demonstrative *illi* (meaning *that*) was used in front of nouns, which soon lost its first syllable to produce *li, la*, ancestors of today's *le*, *la*. The indefinite article derived from the number *unus* meaning *one*, and originally worked like a normal adjective, even having a plural form. This latter form has now disappeared, but can still be seen in words such as *quelques-uns*, *les uns*, *d'aucuns.*

In Old French, rather like in English today, the definite article was only used to express specificity, i.e. whether a noun such as a book was *the* book or merely *a* book, and so on. As Old French developed, however, nouns began to lose their inflections indicating gender, whilst the final *s* indicating the plural began to disappear in spoken language. As a result, the definite article in French began to take on the additional grammatical role of indicating gender and number where there was no semantic reason for an article, as in *la beauté*, *les chiens* (*beauty*, *dogs*). As regards partitive articles, these arise from the tendency of Old French to use the preposition *de* to indicate "a certain quantity of something" e.g. *Je mange de pain* (= *I eat some bread*). When articles took on the additional grammatical role mentioned above, *de* changed to *del* (=*de le*) which for phonetic reasons became *du* e.g. *Je mange du pain* (although the original *de* is retained after negatives, e.g. *Je ne mange pas de pain*).

Origin of adverbs ending *-ment*

The modern adverb form ending *-ment* derives from the practice of adding the suffix *-mente* (the ablative form of *mens* meaning "mind") to an adjective, e.g. *viva* + *mente* = "with a lively mind". Since *mens* is feminine the adjective used took the feminine form. This remains the process for forming *-ment* adverbs today, e.g. *vif* ⇒ *vivement*, even if in some cases there is a variation of spelling for reasons of sound

(e.g. *courant* ⇒ *couramment* and not **courantement*) or simplicity (e.g. *vrai* ⇒ *vraiment* and not **vraiement*).

Origin of *ne … pas* etc.

The negative adverb *ne* stems from Old French *nen* deriving from Latin *non*, and could originally be used to negate a verb on its own, i.e. without the use of a negative word such as *pas*. This tendency still survives with verbs such as *savoir* and *pouvoir* e.g. *Je ne peux vous dire = I cannot tell you.* The word *ne* was eventually reinforced with a range of nouns such as *pas*, *point*, *goutte*, *mie*, *grain* (*step*, *spec*, *drop*, *crumb* and *seed*) which were originally used in a relevant context i.e *Il ne mange mie* (= *He doesn't eat a crumb*). Eventually these various reinforcers lost their original meaning, and a pressure arose for one form to become generalized. The form that emerged ahead its rivals was *pas*, which was that used in the area including Paris, whose dialect would become standard language of France.

4 The influence of Frankish

400 AD – 771 AD

When in the 5th century AD the Roman Legions retreated from the Western territories in order to defend Rome, the remaining population was left defenceless. All over what is now Western Europe loose coalitions of Germanic tribes, seeking better land and themselves under pressure from the Huns in the East, moved in to fill the vacuum. France was occupied primarily by three sets of Germanic tribes. The Visigoths, who settled in the South and South-West, and who established their capital in Toulouse. The Burgundians, who settled in South-East France (hence the name *Burgundy*) and who established their capital in Lyon (the Roman capital of Gaul). And most significantly as far as the development of modern French is concerned the Franks, who settled in the northern half of France and who established their capital in Paris.

The word *Frank* is a Germanic word deriving from the Norse word *frekkr* meaning *brave* and *free.* The Latin translation *Franci* appears for the first time in the 2nd century AD describing the people living in a area that is now Holland and the Rhineland area of Germany, an area that is referred to by St Jerome in the 4th century as *Francia* from where the word *France* is derived.

Prior to their invasion of northern Gaul the Franks, although not part of the Roman Empire, had had many dealings with the Romans. Many had enrolled as merceneries within the Roman legions, whilst others had settled within Gaul and established themselves as farmers. As such, by the time of the Germanic invasions during the 5th century AD the Franks were broadly speaking acquainted with their language and respectful of their culture. For this reason and the fact that in most of Gaul they were greatly outnumbered by the Gallo-Roman population, the Frankish invaders took on the Latin-based language of the latter and it is this language that would develop into modern French. By contrast those areas where the Franks settled in great concentration, such as modern-day Holland, Northern Belgium and Luxemburg, remained Germanic speaking.

There are many reasons why it was the Franks who of the three Germanic peoples who invaded Gaul played the most important role in the development of French. First, as has been mentioned, there were many Franks already settled in France by the time of the Germanic migrations during the 5th century AD. By constrast the Visigoths did not settle exclusively in South-West France, for some migrated to Northern Spain (the *Cat* from *Catalonia* derives from the word *Goth*). Even more important was the military successes of the Frankish king Clovis (AD 465-511), who after victories against the Gallo-Romans and the Visigoths established a kingdom loosely approximating to

Roman Gaul. For many people an important figure in the development of French nationhood, many later French kings would take his name in its contracted form of *Louis*.

What were the *langue d'oil* and the *langue d'oc*?

The three Germanic settlements would each give rise to its own distinct group of French dialects, and two of these would vye with each other for political and cultural hegemony well into the Middle Ages. The dialects of the Frankish Kingdom came to be known as the *langue d'oil*, (*oil* being the word for *yes* in this dialect) and it is these forms of French that would give rise to modern French. The dialects of South and South-Western France came to be known as the *langue d'oc*, (*oc* being the word for *yes* in this dialect) and in the Middle Ages had an cultural prestige stretching well beyond the borders of France as the language of troubadour poetry.

One of the major differences between the two groups of dialects lies in their degree of germanicization. Parts of the *langue d'oc* region had been conquered much earlier than the rest of Gaul, and as such were more heaviliy romanized. This, combined with the fact that the Visigoths were much more thinly spread than were the Franks meant that *langue d'oc* dialects were less influenced by Germanic. The *langue d'oil* region by contrast was less Romanized and contained a far higher concentration of Germanic settlers. As such the Frankish language was to have a significant influence on the northern form of Gallo-Roman, and thereby on the development of modern French.

Origin of aspirate *h*

One aspect of modern French that has been influenced by Frankish is the aspirate *h* form, that is where *h* is treated like a consonant even though it is not pronounced. The common way of pronouncing the letter *h* prior to the Frankish invasion was as a vowel, as in *l'heure*. When the Franks came, they pronounced their words beginning with *h* with an audible release of breath as in modern English. Over time, however, the *h* sound became weaker and weaker until it was no longer pronounced, although preceding words continued to behave as if the *h* were a consonant. This is why modern French has two *h* forms: the aspirate form, which for the most part indicates Frankish origin, such as *la haine*, *le héron*, *la honte*, and the unaspirate form, which generally indicates non-Frankish origin, such as *l'homme*, *l'heure*, *l'honneur*. The origins of the aspirate *h* form is also the reason why when French borrows words beginning with *h* from English, the *h* is aspirated, as with *le hitparade*, *le hockey*, *le hall*.

Another Frankish import into Gallo-Roman at the time was the letter *w*. A number of words beginning with a *w* were adopted, but as the Gallo-Romans did not have a *w* sound, these were replaced with *gw* and finally *g*. This is why some Germanic words in English begin with *w* (as in *wager*, *war* and the name *William*) have equivalents in French that begin with *g* (*gage*, *guerre* and the name *Guillaume*).

Effect of Frankish word stress on French

Another indirect way in which the Franks influenced French was through word stress. The Frankish language, rather like modern English, was characterised by a stress pattern whereby one particular syllable was stressed whilst the remaining syllables were unstressed. This contrasted with the Gallo-Roman language of the time which, like modern French, does not have syllable stress. This can be illustrated by comparing the English word *agriculture*, where the first syllable is stressed and the others unstressed, with the modern French word *agriculture*, where all syllables are broadly speaking stressed equally. After the invasion of the Franks, Gallo-Roman for a time began to take on the stress pattern of Frankish. As a result a word such as *pedem* (*foot*) took on syllable

stress, taking on the pronunciation '**pee**-dem'. As time went on, however, stressed vowels tended to become dipthongs (that is to say, two-vowel sounds) whilst unstressed vowels tended to become a neutral *uh* sound, or even disappear altogether. Thus the first syllable of *pedem* became 'pi-ay' whilst the second disappeared altogether, forming the word which would become the modern French *pied*. A similar process happened with the word *tela* meaning *cloth*. The first syllable of *tela* became 'ay-ee' which then contracted to 'wa', whilst the second disappeared altogether giving the modern French *toile*.

Why do some adjectives in French come before the noun?

Another Frankish influence on the development of French lies in the position of adjectives with regard to nouns. Whilst in modern French the tendency is to place adjectives after the nouns (e.g. *une fleur blanche*) except with certain very common adjectives (*une longue histoire*), in Old French the situation was much more fluid, with many adjectives coming before the noun. Given that Germanic languages tend to place adjectives before the noun (e.g. *a white flower*), it seems likely that it is due to Frankish influence that French does not place adjectives exclusively after the noun. This view is reinforced by the fact that many common place names in Northern Europe where the Germanic influence was strong contain prepositive adjectives (*Neufchâtel, Neuveville, Francheville*), but in more southerly areas where Germanic influence was weaker they contain postpositive adjectives (*Châteauneuf*, *Villeneuve*, *Villefranche*).

5 Charlemagne

AD 771 - 814

In the year 771 the Frankish monarch Charlemagne (whose name derives from the Latin *Carolus Magnus* meaning "Charles the Great") united many of the territories that were formerly part of the Roman Empire in what became known as the Carolingian Empire. By that time the spoken Gallo-Roman language was quite different from classical Latin, the latter being virtually unintelligible to the great majority of people. Although a Germanic speaker, Charlemagne had a great respect for Latin born of its association with ancient Roman culture and the Church, and because of this wished to see it restored to its classical form. To this end, he employed scholars from all over his Empire, the most famous being the English monk Alcuin, to write and teach classical Latin. Among the most significant achievements was the duplication of some of the great works of Ancient Rome and Greece, many of which now only survive from these copies. Another achievement was his commissioning of a series of lexicons listing words in Gallo-Roman and Classical Latin, making important classical Latin texts such as St Jerome's Latin Bible more accessible. With this renaissance in scholarship came a reformation of writing convention called *Caroline minuscule* whereby words were written in a clear lower-case script and were clearly separated from each other. It also instituted the convention of beginning sentences with a capital letter.

A significant consequence of this was the creation of a "Latinizing tendency", that is to say the tendency to introduce into the popular language words stemming directly from classical Latin alongside those introduced into the language via the Roman invasions. This gave rise to the phenomenon of doublets, that is two words of differing meanings with the same etymology. For example:

Inherited through Gallo-Roman	Imported from classical Latin
frêle (*weak*)	fragile (*fragile*)
hôtel (*hôtel*)	hôpital (*hospital*)

poison (*poison*)	potion (*potion*)

Another consequence of this was the introduction of a large number of abstract nouns stemming directly from Latin. For example:

Adjective (via Gallo-Roman)	Noun (via classical Latin)
proche (*near*)	proximité (*nearness*)
certain (*certain*)	certitude (*certainty*)
entier (*full*)	intégrité (*fullness*)
mûr (*mature*)	maturité (*maturity*)

From an English point of view, this certainly adds to the complication of learning French when one considers the ease with which English can create nouns out of adjectives by adding the suffix *-ness* or *–ty*.

AD 814 - 843

When Charlemagne died in 814 there was an increasing conflict between the various regions of the Carolingian Empire. When Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious, died in 840 there was civil war between his three sons. The year 842 saw the signing of the *Strasbourg Oaths*, a defensive pact between two of his sons Louis the German and Charles the Bald against their brother Lothair, which is the earliest surving written document in the French language. This was followed by the Treaty of Verdun in 843 which divided the Empire into three parts. The reigning Emperor Lothair was given the kingdom of Italy plus Francia Media, a collection of Frankish lands to the west of the Rhine including much if what is now Holland, Belgium and eastern France. This was renamed Lotharingia after its ruler, from which the name Lorraine is derived. Louis the German became ruler of Francia Orientalis, the Frankish lands of Germanic speech to the east of the Rhine. The Latin name soon fell into disuse in favour of the Germanic word *Tiutschland*, or "Land of the Germans", hence the German word *Deutschland*. (The term *Allemagne* comes from *Allemani*, the name of another Germanic tribe who settled in what is now Alsace). Finally Charles the Bald was given control of Francia Occidentalis, containing much of what is now western and central France. Given the name changes of the other two parts of the former empire, the *occidentalis* became redundant, and was contracted to *Francia*, from which the name *France* is derived.

6 The influence of Old Norse

AD 850 - 911

During the mid-800s Northern France was subjected to a series of raids by the Vikings, seafaring warriors from Scandinavia, occurring in the northern coastal areas of France and in inland towns such as Rouen and Paris that could be accessed by river. In 911 the Treaty of St Clair sur Epte was signed granting the raiders, who came to be known as "Norsemen", the territory that became known as Normandy. Their chief, Rollo made Rouen his capital and is widely considered to have been the first Duke of Normandy.

For reasons both of numbers and the fact that the invaders were predominantly males, the Vikings quickly intermarried with the local population and soon began speaking French instead of Old Norse. As such the influence of Old Norse on French is relatively small, confining itself in the main to two areas:

- Place names – those of Norman origin include those ending *–bec* (meaning *stream*), *-fleur* (meaning *bay*), and *-tot* (meaning *farm*).
- Certain specialist nautical terms such as *cingler* (= *to sail*) and *ris* (=*reef*), but also a small number of common terms such as *vague* (= *wave*).

7 Dialectization and the rise of *Francien*

AD 987 - 1200

During the Roman Empire the spoken form of Latin was broadly the same as in any part of the Empire, be it in what is now France, Spain or Italy. The effect of the Germanic invasions that brought about the fall of the Roman Empire was to create a strong tendency towards linguistic fragmentation or "dialectization". This was in part because of the number of different Germanic languages that were influencing the spoken Latin of the time. Another important factor was the fact that Europe had changed from a highly centralized form of administration to a system of feudalism, where communities had very few dealings outside of the territory of their local feudal overlord, and still fewer outside their broader geographical region. Not only did this lead to dialectization throughout the former Empire, but also within the various Romance-speaking countries. As such there were a range of different forms of Gallo-Roman, so that someone from Paris would be virtually incomprehensible to someone from Limousin, who would be equally incomprehensible to someone from Burgundy, and so on.

Emergence of *Francien* as dominant dialect

The language that became the standard spoken and written language in France, was the dialect spoken in the Ile de France (that is, Paris and the surrounding area) called *Francien*. (This region was referred to as an "island" because it lies near the confluence of three rivers, the Seine, the Oise and the Marne; it was referred to as *France* at the time because it was the oldest Frankish settlement in the territory.) There are various reasons why Francien became the dominant dialect in France. The Ile de France had a large population compared with other regions, and it was economically and agriculturally rich. In 987 the Duke of the tiny kingdom of France was elected king by his peers, that is to say he became the feudal overlord of the territories in the former Gaul, but not the direct ruler of them. From around 1100 onwards the Kings of France began to hold court in Paris. This court became a source of literary patronage, giving to *Francien* a considerable literary prestige. One particular type of French poetic narrative, which related the adventures and loves of legendary or idealized heroes, became extremely popular throughout Europe. Such narratives came to be known as *Romances* after the language family to which French belonged, from which the modern French word *roman* meaning *novel* comes, and the English word *romantic*. Further adding to Francien's prestige was the establishment of the Sorbonne and other educational and legal bodies in Paris around this time. Finally, Francien was geographically at the centre of the Northern Langue d'Oil region, and thus served as a *lingua franca* or language of expedience between other northern dialects which were not always mutually comprehensible.

1500 - 1600

Over the next few centuries the influence of Latin began to wane and people began to write administrative documents in their own dialect rather than Latin. As France became more of a centralized nation the existence of different written dialects led to confusion and ambiguity in adminstrative texts. In response to this, in 1539 François I passed the decree of Villers-Cotterêts making it compulsory for all official administrative documents to be written in French, that is the dialect of Francien. During this time French began to take on more and more words from other languages, as the vernacular language lacked the more specialist vocabulary necessary for it to perform its new role as administrative language of the nation. Furthermore French was being increasingly used in scholarly texts (for example, Jacques Cartier's geographical

writings and Nostradamus' astrological writings were written in French), further necessitating the import of new words.

But the ascendancy of French did not just occur for administrative or academic reasons but for cultural reasons as well. With the Renaissance at its height, ancient Greece and Rome became models for all the burgeoning new European states, and the idea of a strong and versatile national language – like Greek and Latin before it – became paramount. During this time the expansion of the vocabulary of French became a question of national prestige. New words arrived from Latin (*agriculteur*, *fidèle* and *gratuité*), Greek (*académie*, *enthousiasme* and *sympathie*), Spanish (*anchois*, *bizarre* and *camarade*) and Arabic (*chiffre*, *zéro*, *tasse*, *jupe*). But the greatest number of words during this period were imported from Italian (the fact that Catherine de Medici was for a long time Regent of France create a fashion for things Italian). Italian imports included *artisan*, *balcon*, *banque*, *cabinet*, *concert* and *passager*. Also this period saw the appearance of the first French grammar book - John Palsgrave's *Esclarcissement de la langue françoyse* - in 1530. Despite its French title the book was, ironically, written in English.

If Francien was now the dominant dialect both legally and culturally, this did not stop it borrowing from other dialects. For example, the words *abeille*, *auberge*, *casserole* and *salade* come from Provençal; *crabe*, *cable*, *crevette* and *falaise* come from Normand; *avalanche* and *chalet* come from Savoyard; *bijou* comes from Breton; *boulanger* and *cauchemar* come from Picard-Walloon; *buerre* and *poêle* come from Lorrain; and *choucroute* and *quiche* come from Alsacien.

The birth of accents

It was also during the 16th century that accents began to appear. With the recent invention of the printing press, printers looked for ways of eliminating ambiguity and redundant letters. The solution to these problems was the use of accents and other markings. For example, in 1530 the cedilla was introduced as a means of making it clear that the *c* was soft before *a*, *o* and *u* (up till then printers had used *-ce-*, *-ss-*, *-ch-* or just *-c-*). And in 1531 the *e* acute was introduced on final syllables of words, and the apostrophe also made its appearance. It was also during this period the *e* acute began to be used to replace superfluous consonants, as in *école* which was formerly written (but not pronounced) *eschole*. It was not until the 1700s, however, that internal consonants disappeared to be replaced by acute or circonflex accents. For example, *mesme* became *même*, and *teste* became *tête.*

1600s – an era of linguistic regulation

The second half of the 1500s was characterized by major political instability due principally to religious conflict and a series of weak monarchs. In some ways as a reaction to this, the 1600s was characterized by a highly regimented social structure centered around an absolute monarchy. This regimentation was parallelled by an enthusiasm in literature and the arts for the classical values of simplicity and austerity. One first manifestation of this as far as the French language is concerned was the work of the grammarian Malherbe, who sought to add clarity to the language of the Royal Court by ridding it of archaisms, neologisms and words borrowed from other dialects or languages. Just as influential was the grammarian Vaugelas whose *Remarques sur la langue Françoise* (1647) sought to rationalize and simplify the French language, and was referred to by many of the great writers of the period who undertook revisions of their works as a result. Most influential of all was the *Grammaire de Port-Royal* which evoked the authority of both logic and usage as a means of returning simplicity and elegance to the language. Another manifestation of this linguistic regimentation was the founding by Cardinal Richelieu in 1635 of the Académie Française. This body was set up to regulate the development of the French language as a means of fostering

national identity and political unity. Over the years the Académie produced a series of publications such as dictionaries through which it codified the spelling, vocabulary and grammar of the new language.

It was also during the 1600s that the past historic and the imperfect subjunctive began to disappear from use in spoken French on account of their complexity. The past historic (the *passé simple* or the "simple past", so-called because it is made up of one verb) was replaced by the perfect (the *passé composé* or "compound past") which was much easier to form. And the imperfect subjunctive was replaced by the present subjunctive, creating a sequence of tenses that goes against expectation for the English speaker: *J'étais contente qu'il* ***soit*** (rather than *fusse*) *là – I was pleased that he* ***was*** *there*. Both forms are still used in written French today, but only in very formal or literary contexts.

1700 – 20th C

Although the decree of Villers-Cotterêts ensured the use of written French (i.e. *Francien*) in official documentation throughout France, it remained the case that most people could not understand French and still fewer could speak it. In 1790 it is estimated that out of a population of 25 million people, about a quarter could not speak French and another quarter could only speak it a little. During the French Revolution the revolutionary government attempted to get rid of the 30 or so local dialects in favour of French in order to eradicate the vestiges of feudalism and achieve national unity. This they attempted to achieve through the creation of compulsory French-language schooling, French newspapers and the compulsory use of French in local government. A lack of qualified teachers meant that it was not until 1832 that the first primary schools were introduced but even then it was not until the 1880s that universal compulsory primary schooling was achieved. It was also in 1832 that the government decreed that the spelling and grammar stipulated by the Académie Française was compulsory for public exams, official documents and to obtain state employment. It is as a result of this that there has arisen in France a far more prescriptive attitude towards grammar and vocabulary than exists in England, an attitude that informs some of the legislation relating to the French language that has been passed in recent years.

Despite the introduction of primary schooling most people continued to use regional dialects during the 19th century. It was not until the First World War that the tide began to turn away from regional dialects and towards the national language. Because of the appalling losses experienced during the first battles, units originally formed along regional lines were reformed, taking in soldiers from every part of France. As a result soldiers tended to use French to communicate, and this trend continued in post-war life. With fathers speaking French at home, draconian punishments for children who used dialects at school and the development of mass media and publishing, it was not long before French achieved the universal status that it enjoys today.

8 French in the 20th century

If it was during the 20th century that French was fully established as the national language of France, it was ironically during the same century that there occured a dramatic decline in its international influence. From around the time of Louis XIV to the beginning of the 20th century French was very much viewed as the language of international communication within European and European-influenced countries. This situation probably arose out of a number of factors including the consistant political power that France enjoyed during this time, its geographical position at the heart of Europe, its strong historical relations with all the major Western nations, its immense cultural prestige, both in terms of the arts and in terms of "cultured living " (food, wine,

fashion, furniture etc.), aspects that were important to the international diplomatic set. Various factors, most notably the dominance of the United States in international politics, commerce, technology and popular culture, have meant that it is now English and not French that is the dominant international language. However, in many ways French still retains its role as an international language of communication, being an official language in most of the major international organisations such as the United Nations, the European Union, NATO and UNESCO.

Legislation in defence of French

For some it is not just internationally that French is under threat, but also within France itself, on account of lowering grammatical and orthographic standards, and the relentless incursions of English. In order to combat this perceived decline the *Haut Comité pour la défense de la langue française* was established in 1966, following in the tradition of linguistic regulation established with the founding of the Académie Française. Perhaps its most significant action has been the establishment in 1976 of the *loi Bas-Lauriol* which greatly restricted the use of foreign language in a wide range of official documents and public media, most notably advertising, radio and television. This was reinforced in 1994 by the *Loi Toubon*, which among other things restricted the transmission of English-language music to 40% of daily airplay. In 1984 the *Haut Comité* became the *Commissariat général de la langue française* and continued the regulatory work by offering official French terms to replace imported English ones, such as *commercialisation* for *marketing*, and *logiciel* for *software*. On a grammatical and orthographic level the regulatory mantle has passed to the Minister of Education, who has the power to decree on these matters via *Tolérances* published in the *Journal officiel de la République française*.

It would be wrong, however, to assume from this tendency towards linguistic regulation that the French language is in any respect developmentally static, insular or inflexible. French remains open to foreign - especially English – borrowings. Indeed it often adapts its English borrowings in such a way as they become purely French words, that is they no longer have meaning in their original language, e.g. *parking* (= *car park*) and *rugbyman* (= *rugby player*). But far more new words are created from French's own resources through processes such as prefixation, e.g. *déindustrialiser* (= *deindustrialize*) and suffixation, e.g. *perceuse* (= *drill*) or changing meaning e.g *cohabitation* (= *cohabitation*). Indeed English loan words can be given French suffixes to create words that are wholly French e.g. *gadgetisation*, *gadgétophile*; or else French words coined to replace English words can spawn new words lacking in English, e.g. *logiciel*, coined to replace *software*, has led to *progiciel* (= *software package*) and *didacticiel* (= *teaching software*), whilst *informatique* (= *computing*) has produced *bureautique* (= *office automation*), *productique* (= *industrial automation*) and *télématique* (= *telematics*). Furthermore, French has a significant capacity for creating compound words e.g. *porte-savon* (= soap holder), *rond-point* (= *roundabout*), *tournevis* (= *screwdriver*) and *mise en cause* (= *implication*), a quality more commonly associated with English and other Germanic languages. Indeed modern French, led by the media and advertising, is taking on a syntactic flexibility akin to English, for example using transitive verbs intransitively e.g. *Le chocolat, j'adore!* (= *I adore chocolate!*) or vice-versa e.g. *parler football* (= *to talk football*) or using a range of juxtapositions such as *pause café* (= *coffee break*), *tarif étudiant* (= *student price*) or *responsable formation* (= *training manager*).

9 French in the world

French in Europe

France is of course not the only country in the world where French is spoken. There are four other countries in Europe in which French has shared official status: Belgium, Switzerland, Luxemburg and Italy. Belgium came into being

in 1830 after a long history of being governed by other nations such as the Spanish, Austrians, French and Dutch. Belgium itself comprises two main groups, the Flemish who inhabit Flanders where the official language is Flemish, a variation of Dutch; and the Walloons who inhabit Wallonia where the official language is French. The capital Brussels is officially bilingual, but is largely French-speaking. Overall there are some 4 million native French-speakers in Belgium. Despite this small number, Belgium has significantly contributed to French's international profile through its colonial history and its role as one of the major centres of the European Union. French is one of the three official languages of Switzerland, along with German and Italian, and is spoken by about 1.3 million people. The largest French-speaking city in Switzerland, Geneva, is host to a number of international organisations, including the United Nations and the International Red Cross.

French is also the official language of Luxemburg, although most citizens are trilingual, speaking Luxemburgish (a dialect of German) in informal contexts, French and German. Here too the presence of a major European centre, the European Parliament, serves to maintain the profile of French as an international language. A further European outpost of French is in the Val d'Aoste region of North-West Italy, where French remains an official language. Although most people speak Italian as a first language, French is still part of people's cultual identity, and children are often taught to speak it from a very young age.

There is in fact a part of the United Kingdom where French has co-official status - the Channel Islands (Jersey, Guernsey and Sark). Known in French as the *Iles Anglo-Normandes*, these were part of the Duchy of Normandy prior to the 1066 invasion, and were consequently French-speaking. After the Norman Conquest they came under the authority of the English crown, a situation that has not changed in spite of the fact that mainland Normandy passed back to the French crown during the late Middle Ages.

French outside of Europe

France's colonial past has meant that there is a large number of French-speakers outside of Europe. France's first wave of colonial expansion lasted from the early 1600s to the mid 1700s and involved the colonization of parts of America, India and West Africa. The second lasted from 1830 to the 1920s, involving both France and Belgium, and involved the colonization of parts of Africa and the Middle and Far East. The result of this is that there are now more than 112 million people who count French as their first language (another 60 million people use French as an occasional language), serving to rank French ninth in the world in terms of language use. Of the nearly 50 million native French speakers outside of Europe, the greatest proportion are to be found in Central and West Africa where French is in many cases the official language. The highest concentration of French speakers are to be found in the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) although many speakers are also to be found in countries such as Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Senegal, Zaïre, Togo, Congo, Burkina Faso and Mali. In the Indian Ocean there are significant numbers of French speakers in Madagascar, Mauritius and the Réunion (which is a *Département d'Outre Mer* or *DOM*, meaning that it is administered like a metropolitan *département*).

French is also widely spoken in Canada where it is the co-official language with English. Overall 6 million people are native speakers, of which 5 million live in Quebec. Differences with standard French pronunciation include *infin* for *enfants*, *p'tsi* for *p'tit*, and *dziue* for *dieu*. There are also some 300 000 French speakers in Louisiana (named by French settlers after Louis XIV). These speak one of two dialects, colonial French (in New Orleans and the plantations along the Mississippi) and

Cajun (whose speakers are the descendants of the first French settlers in Canada called Acadians). In South America French is spoken in the *DOM* French Guyana. There are also French speakers in the West Indies (Haiti, and the *DOMs* Guadeloupe and Martinique) and in Oceania (New Caledonia and French Polynesia which are *Territoires d'Outre Mer* or *TOMs*, meaning that they are administered like a colony). In the Middle East Lebanon remains the one country with a significant French presence, on account of the fact that a great proportion of the political establishment have received a French education. Finally in Asia French has prestige among the intellectual elites in Cambodia and Laos, but has declined in recent years in Vietnam.

Most of these above states belong to an international organisation called La Francophonie open to any nation or indeed region with a significant French-speaking population. Although the term dates from the 19th century, the current organisation dates from 1970 with the creation of the *Agence de coopération cuturelle et technique francophone*. The project was given added momentum with the holding of the first international summit meeting in Paris in 1986, and the subsequent summits, held biannually since 1987, have seen more and more states and regions taking part. Although the member countries of La Francophonie differ greatly in terms of size, geography, wealth and ethnicity, they all share a belief in the cultural and economic importance of maintaining and furthering the status of French within the world.