

Topic Page: [French language](#)

Definition: **French** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Major language, spoken in France and parts of Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, Haiti, Africa and other areas. There are c.80-100 million French speakers worldwide. Descended from Latin, it is one of the Romance languages and part of the Indo-European family. It is one of the six official languages of the United Nations.

Summary Article: **French language**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

member of the Romance group of the Italic subfamily of the Indo-European family of languages (see Romance languages). It is spoken as a first language by more than 70 million people, chiefly in France (55 million speakers), Belgium (3 million), Switzerland (1.5 million), former French and Belgian colonies in Africa (5 million), and Canada (6.5 million). French probably ranks next after English as a second tongue. Having served as an international language in diplomacy and commerce as well as among educated people during the last few centuries, it still enjoys great prestige culturally and is one of the languages used officially by the United Nations.

Distinctive Features

Phonetically distinctive French sounds are the nasal vowels and the uvular *r*. Three accents over vowels are employed: the acute (´) over *e*, the grave (`) over *a* and *e*, and the circumflex (ˆ) over *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*. An accent may serve to indicate the pronunciation of a vowel, distinguish homonyms, or mark the discarding of the letter *s* from a word. A cedilla placed below the letter *c* (ç) signals that the *c* is to be pronounced as *s*. Ordinarily, *c* is pronounced as *k* before *a*, *o*, *u*, or a consonant and as *s* before *e* and *i*.

Written French uses the Roman alphabet. French spelling, which has many silent letters, is not always a reliable guide to pronunciation. For example, final consonants are generally not sounded. An *s* or *x* added to the end of a noun to form the plural is also usually not pronounced. In such a case, the plural number is actually indicated in speech by the form of the article, as in *le garçon*(lɛ ɡärsôn') [the boy] and *les garçons*(lã ɡärsôn') [the boys]. French spelling, however, is closer to the pronunciation than is English spelling.

History of French

French is descended from Vulgar Latin, the vernacular Latin (as distinguished from literary Latin) of the Roman Empire (see Latin language). When ancient Gaul (now modern France) was conquered by the Romans in the 2d and 1st cent. B.C., its inhabitants spoke Gaulish, a Celtic language, which was rapidly supplanted by the Latin of the Roman overlords. In the 5th cent. A.D. the Franks, a group of Germanic tribes, began their invasion of Gaul, but they too were Romanized. Although modern French thus inherited several hundred words of Celtic origin and several hundred more from Germanic, it owes its structure and the greater part of its vocabulary to Latin.

By the 9th cent. the language spoken in what is now France was sufficiently different from Latin to be a distinct language. It is called Old French and was current from the 9th to the 13th cent. The earliest extant text in Old French is the *Oaths of Strasbourg*, dated 842. Of the various dialects of Old French, Francien (the north-central dialect spoken in Paris and the region around it) in time became the standard form of the language because of the increasing political and cultural importance of Paris. French from

the 14th through the 16th cent. is known as Middle French. During this period many words and expressions were borrowed from Latin, Greek, and Italian, and a group of French poets, the Pléiade (see under Pleiad), encouraged the French to develop and improve their language and literature.

The modern period of French began in the 17th cent. In 1635 the French Academy was founded by Cardinal Richelieu to maintain the purity of the language and its literature and to serve as the ultimate judge of approved usage. While the vocabulary and style of Modern French have been influenced by movements such as romanticism and realism, structurally French has changed comparatively little since the Middle French period. Standardization of the French language has been aided in modern times by more widespread education and by the mass media.

Bibliography

- See U. T. Holmes; A. H. Schutz, *A History of the French Language* (1938);
Pope, M. K. , *From Latin to Modern French* (2d ed. 1952, repr. 1961);
J. Fox; R. Hood, *Concise History of the French Language* (1968);
Rickard, P. , *A History of the French Language* (1974).

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

French language. (2018). In P. Lagasse, & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia* (8th ed.).
New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from
https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/french_language



The Columbia Encyclopedia, © Columbia University Press 2018



The Columbia Encyclopedia, © Columbia University Press 2018

APA

French language. (2018). In P. Lagasse, & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/french_language

Chicago

"French language." In *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, by Paul Lagasse, and Columbia University. 8th ed. Columbia University Press, 2018. https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/french_language

Harvard

French language. (2018). In P. Lagasse & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia*. (8th ed.). [Online]. New York: Columbia University Press. Available from: https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/french_language [Accessed 13 November 2019].

MLA

"French language." *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Paul Lagasse, and Columbia University, Columbia University Press, 8th edition, 2018. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/french_language. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.