

IF YOU THINK YOU KNOW FRENCH – THINK AGAIN!

## **40 SURPRISING FACTS ABOUT FRENCH**

from *The Story of French*  
by Julie Barlow and Jean-Benoît Nadeau

### **GLOBAL STATUS**

- French is second only to English for the number of countries where it has official status – 32 as opposed to 45. And, with 56 members, *La Francophonie* is now larger than the Commonwealth, which has 53.
- French is also the only language, with English, that is taught in every country of the world, with 100 million students and 2 million teachers – 20 % of whom are outside of francophone countries.
- Kinshasa is the world's second largest French speaking city, after Paris, and before Montreal and Brussels.
- The number of French speakers has TRIPLED since 1945 largely since most former French and Belgian colonies kept French as their language of government, education and science after decolonization.
- Between 6 and 11 million Americans speak French, as does half the population of Algeria, and 15 percent of Israelis.
- French is still a working language of the UN, the EU, and dozens of international organizations including the International Red Cross committee, International Labor Organization, Amnesty International, and Doctors without Borders. Francophone countries form an important bloc in the UN, the EU, the African Union, and the Arab League.
- Two G-8 countries (France and Canada) and six European countries (France, Belgium, Switzerland, Romania, Luxembourg, Monaco) are French-speaking countries.

### **BUSINESS, SCIENCE AND TRAVEL**

- France is the most visited country in the world with 75 million tourists every year.

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- French-speaking scientists and technicians invented the hot air balloon, cinema, radial tires, smart cards, HDTV, the snowmobile, the saxophone, Velcro and more.
- Areva, of Paris, is the world's largest civil nuclear energy company.
- The world's leader in international engineering is SNC-Lavalin of Montreal.
- Toulouse and Montreal, with Seattle, are the world's leading cities in aerospace technology.
- Voice-compression technology, used in a billion cellular phones worldwide, was patented by *Université de Sherbrooke* in Quebec.
- French Guyana, is home to the launching pad of Ariane space rockets, the world's only commercially viable launcher program.

### CULTURE

- The latest edition of the popular comic book *Astérix* was printed in 7 million copies in French alone and translated into 23 languages.
- French film production – at 500 films per year – is number two in the world. In Canada, Quebec films often outsell Hollywood films at the box office.
- The *Agence universitaire de la Francophonie* networks 630 French language universities and more than 350 French faculties worldwide, for a total of 120,000 professors and researchers.
- Many major living French language authors – Milan Kundera, Nancy Houston, Jonathan Littel, Andreï Makhine, Tahar Ben Jeloun, Dany Laferrière, François Cheng – did not speak French as a mother tongue.

### LINGUISTICS

- At the time of the French Revolution, 75% of French citizens did not speak French as a mother tongue. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, French was spoken more widely in Holland and Germany than in some parts of France.
- About a third to a half of basic English words come from French, including pedigree, surf, view, strive, challenge, pride, staunch and war.
- The origin of French language purism, including the French Academy, can all be traced back to the influence of a single poet, François de Malherbe.

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- The French Academy, created in 1635, was the first body ever to rule over a language. Since then, most of the world's main languages have had a similar type of institution and most countries of the world rule over proper language rules, including all Spanish-speaking, Scandinavian, German-speaking, Arabic-speaking countries. English-speaking countries are the only exception.
- French has more than a million words and 20,000 new ones are created every year.
- The *Office québécois de la langue française* receives 50 million information requests for words every year, half of them from Europe: this is 50 times more requests than the French Academy receives.

### **IN CANADA**

- Quebec's language protection measures have been a model for policy in Spain, France, Brazil, and 29 US states.
- In Canada, 300,000 children are enrolled in French immersion programs, and 3 million adults whose mother tongue is not French speak French as a second language.
- Half a million native French speakers live in Ontario and their flag, the Franco-Ontarian flag, is one of Ontario's seven official emblems. The premier of Ontario, Dalton McGuinty, was raised in French by his mother and sent all his children to French school.
- The Acadians had an official flag and anthem a century before Canada. New Brunswick was the first Canadian province to declare itself officially bilingual and remains the only one.
- There are eight million Francophones living in North America, and most are descendants of only 10,000 original French colonists.
- Canada is one of the few countries where Common Law is practiced in French. Lawyers from New Brunswick played an important role in drafting the constitution of Mauritius. The New Quebec Civil Code was influential in the drafting of the new codes of law in Russia and China.

### **IN THE UNITED STATES**

- In the United States, French is the number four native language and the second most taught second language after Spanish.

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- Quebec is the United States' 6<sup>th</sup> trading partner, and over half a million Americans work for French companies.
- Most of the early legendary figures of the American frontier in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were French Canadians born in the St. Lawrence valley. They guided Lewis and Clark, colonized New Mexico, assisted the pioneers of the Union Pacific, and discovered gold in California.
- New York, California and Florida have joined Louisiana and New England as the main centers of French in United States.
- In the US, half of foreign films watched, and 30% of foreign books read are in French.
- French is a mother tongue to 1.6 million Americans and 6 to 11 million Americans speak French fluently as a second language. Of the world's 1100 *Alliances Françaises*, 130 are in the United States, which is also home for 55 of the world's 530 foreign French schools.

### **IN THE COMMONWEALTH**

- French is the main foreign language taught in Britain and remains a popular foreign language in most English speaking countries.
- The United Kingdom and Ireland are home to 14 *Alliances Françaises*, more than 50 French clubs and 9 *lycées* and *collèges français*. In all, more than half a million UK citizens are studying French from kindergarten to university level.
- Five Commonwealth Countries have French as one of their official languages: Canada, Cameroon, Mauritius, the Seychelles and Vanuatu.
- Quebec opened its own quasi-diplomatic delegation in London in 1871, shortly after Canada became an independent country in 1867.

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