

FEIT FESTIVAL OF LANGUAGES

# Is French really that French?

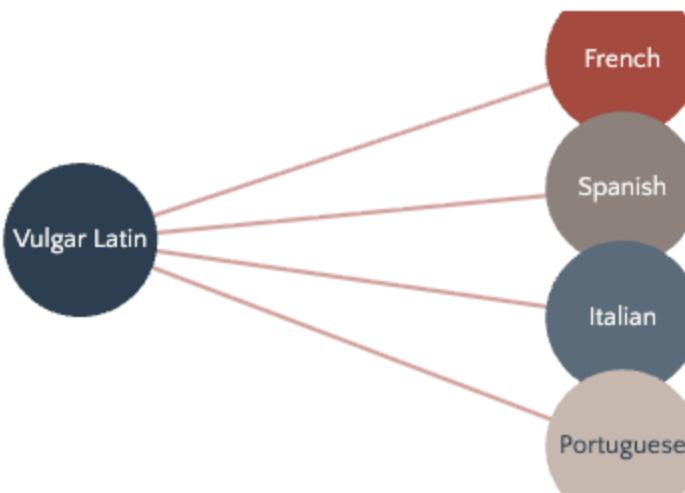
---

Orthography as social capital, in France and  
beyond

Raphaël Merx

# French: A Romance Language

## ⌚ Latin roots

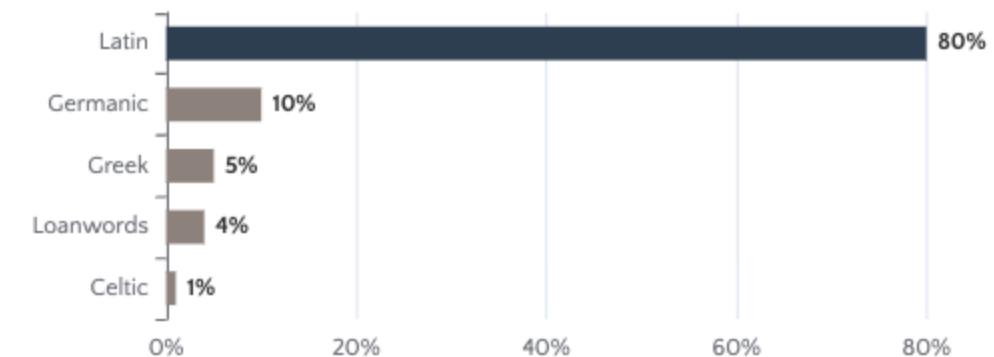


## Shared roots, different paths

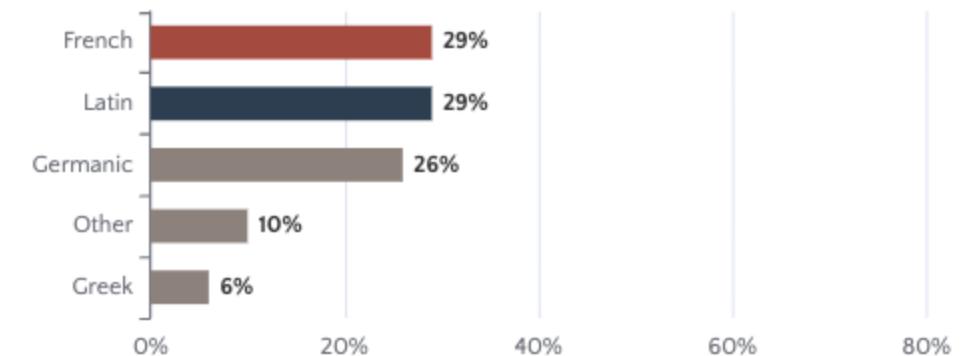
Latin **computare** → French **compter** → English **count**

Latin **computare** → English **compute**

## Word origins: French



## Word origins: English



## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

# A minority language for most French history

16th C.

1539

Replaces Latin in official documents

But remains a **minority language**, spoken mainly by Parisian elites.

Revolution

1789

French Revolution - Only 10% speak French fluently

Most speak Occitan, Breton, Alsatian, or other regional languages.

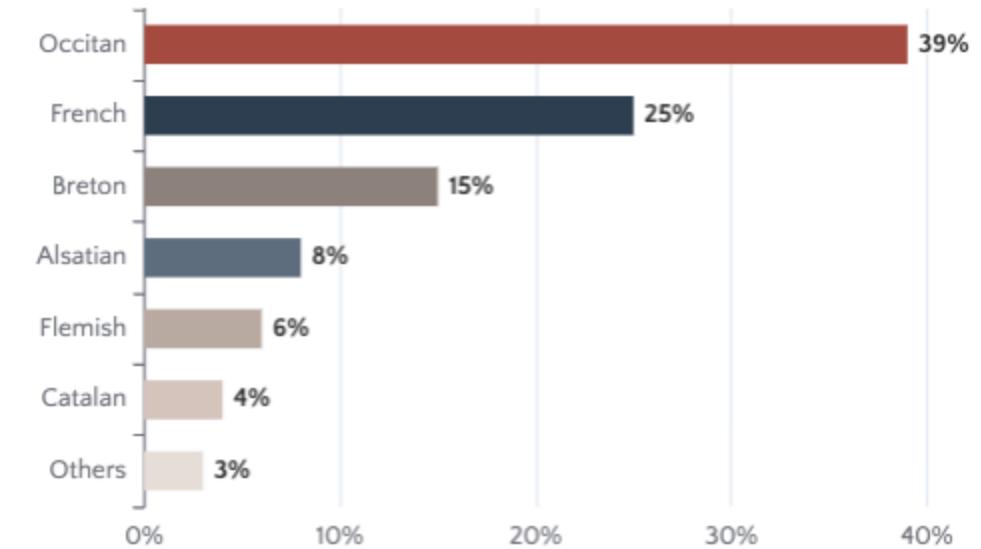
Jules Ferry

1881

Compulsory French-only education

Children punished for speaking regional languages.

Languages of France in 1860



💡 The *Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts* (1539), which made French the sole language of the justice system, is the oldest piece of legislation still in force in France today.

## CURRENT STATUS

# Today: A global language, majority of speakers in Africa

321M

Total Speakers

Globally

#6

World Ranking

By total speakers

↑ Projected to reach 500M+ speakers by 2050

🌐 Official language in 29 countries

↓ De-francisation in some former colonies (e.g. Algeria)

## French Speakers by Continent



💡 Over 60% of French speakers now reside in Africa. Projected 85% by 2050.

---

Now the conspiracy theories

---

# Tetun: a lingua franca, with spelling difficulties

## A History

Portuguese  
colonisation  
**1500s**  
- 1975

### Common language

Tetun is the **lingua franca** in Timor-Leste.

Indonesian  
occupation  
**75-99**

### Language of resistance

Indonesian occupation – Tetun used as a symbol of identity and resistance.

Independence  
**2002**

### Official language

Tetun becomes official alongside Portuguese.

## Spelling

Intuitive/Common

**Hau harakak ba neba**

(I want to go there)



Official

**Ha'u hakarak bá ne'ebá.**

# French spelling: has its problems too

AB So many silent letters...

beaucoup

"a lot"

Pronounced: bokoo

chercent

"they search"

Silent: -nt

eaux

"waters"

Pronounced: o



💡 We internalise that spelling is a social signal (dictée).

# French spelling: Complicated by design

“*L'orthographe servira à distinguer les gens de lettres des ignorants et des simples femmes*”

— François Eudes de Mézeray, 1673

**Translation:** "Spelling will serve to distinguish men of letters from the ignorant and from simple women"



*First edition of the Académie Française dictionary (1694)*

# Bourdieu: Language as symbolic capital



Pierre Bourdieu

(1930–2002)



## Correct spelling = social & cultural capital

- Those who master complex orthography demonstrate their educational credentials, cultural refinement, and class position.
- Spelling becomes a credential that signals membership in the educated elite.

💡 Like wearing an expensive watch, mentioning exclusive holiday destinations, correct spelling serves as a status signal.

# The paradox of French (and Tetun?) spelling



## Universal Norm

Officially, French orthography serves as a **universal standard** meant to:

- ✓ Unify the nation under one linguistic system
- ✓ Facilitate communication across regions
- ✓ Preserve cultural heritage and historical continuity
- ✓ Enable universal literacy and education



## Elite Distinction

In practice, the system functions as a **barrier to entry** that:

- ✗ Requires years of intensive education to master
- ✗ Creates opportunities for the elite to signal superiority
- ✗ Excludes those without access to quality schooling
- ✗ Maintains social hierarchy through linguistic gatekeeping

≠

Claims to be a **tool for universal communication**, yet its extreme complexity makes it **functionally elitist**.

---

# Tenkyu

Thank you in Tok Pisin

---