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French language alive and well
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In a recent survey on attitudes toward bilingualism, carried out by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 72 per cent of Canadians said bilingualism was important, a sharp increase from 56 per cent years ago. What's more, 84 per cent of Canadians said they believed that speaking French would help them get a good job.

The link between employability and bilingualism is not a Canadian phenomenon. Bilingualism is a growing trend the world over. What Canadians probably don't realize is that internationally, French is doing much better than is widely believed – even by the French themselves.

It would be ridiculous to pretend that French is competing with English on the international stage. Yet during the tow years we spent researching our book, *The Story of French*, we had some surprises. Traveling to some 15 countries, what we saw convinced us that French is not only doing better than most people think, it is a global language, the world's other global language.

It's simply false to pretend that French is on the decline. The number of French-speakers in the world has tripled in the last 50 years to 175 million. French is the world's 9th language for number of speakers, but it's still the world's second international language after English, and the only other language taught in all countries of the world.

French far outweighs Spanish, Arabic or even Chinese for its number of students: 100 million. The International Federation of Teachers of French has 80,000 members, a small proportion of the world's 2 million teachers of French – 10,000 of whom are in the United States.

French is second only to English for the number of countries where it is an official language – 33 compared to 45 – and for the number of international institutions where it is used, including the UN, the EU, the International Monetary Fund, the International Red Cross Committee, Interpol and the International Labour Organization.

At last month's Summit of Francophonie – often described as a French language Commonwealth – only half of the organization's 53 members are former French colonies. Ten members of the Francophonie are European, and another 11 European entities have observer status (not all members are countries).

Outside of the Francophonie, Algeria has 15 million French-speakers, while 15 per cent of the population of Israel is francophone (mostly Jews from North Africa and Franch). With 1.5 million native speakers, French ranks as the 4th important native language of the United States.

More importantly, French-speaking networks are rapidly developing across the planet, not in competition with English, but parallel to it.

Under the auspices of the Agence universitaire francophone, (itself under the umbrella of the Francophonie), some 525 French-language universities have created official links. The agency gives 2,000 scholarships per year to encourage academic research in French. In a surprising development, many francophone networks now bypass France almost completely. When Morocco wanted to create an MBA program in the 1980s, it turned to Sherbrooke University in Quebec, where the first such program in French was created.

The same is happening in the business world. When Franco-Ontarian businessman Paul Desmarais (of Power Corporation fame) wanted to expand his empire in Europe, he turned to Belgian business tycoon Albert Frère. In recent years, French businesses have been outsourcing to countries where there is less costly French-speaking labour, like Tunisia, Morocco and Senegal.

If Canadians think French is becoming passé in the business world, they should think again. The world's second engineering company is SNC – Lavalin of Montreal. The world's main nuclear power, for civil energy, is France. North America's biggest printer is Quebecor. The world's second aviation company is Airbus, and Montreal is one of the world's three most important centres for aviation.

French cinema has more viewers abroad than even at home. Quebec films have been regularly beating

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Hollywood productions at box offices in the last few years. Francophone music and literary festivals are multiplying across the planet. Francophone literature, particularly from Africa and the Caribbean, is being used more and more in French departments across the U.S., as the backbone for black studies... in French.

The planetary exchange in French is impressive, and we were surprised by the high status both Canada and Quebec enjoy in this system. In Canada, Quebec is often derided for its language protection measures and Law 101 is considered oppressive, at best. But in the rest of the French-speaking world, Quebec is heralded as a model to follow in language protection.

Even the French look to Quebec for ideas on how to keep French vocabulary contemporary without systematically resorting to English. The Quebec bank of terminology, which contains references to 1 million terms in French, gets 50 million hits per year, mostly from Europe, a striking success when you compare that to the 2 million that the French Academy receives.

One of the most surprising threats to French today is, in fact, coming from the French, most of whom seem to think their language is irremediably on the decline.

Canadians seem to know better.