

SKEMA PUBLIKA CONFERENCE OF 20 OCTOBER 2023

FRANCOPHONIE AND INFLUENCE NOW AND TOMORROW

THE NUMBER OF FRENCH SPEAKERS IN THE WORLD IS GROWING – BUT WHAT ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF THE FRANCOPHONE WORLD?

SUMMARY OF TALKS AND DISCUSSIONS

Speakers (in order of appearance):

- Frédéric Munier, Professor of History, Director of the School of Geopolitics for Business at [SKEMA Business School](#)
- Guy Gweth, Chairman of the [African centre for economic intelligence](#) (CAVIE)
- Claudine Lepage, former Senator for French citizens living outside France
- Clarisse Gérardin, Deputy Director of French Language and Education, Influential Diplomacy Directorate, [Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs](#) (MEAE)
- Daniel Zielinski, Ministerial Delegate for the Francophone World [with the Ministry for Sport and the Olympic and Paralympic Games](#)

Moderated by Claude Revel, Director of [SKEMA Publika](#) and former French interdepartmental delegate for economic intelligence.

INTRODUCTION

This conference is the third in a series of meetings entitled "**At the heart of influences**" organised by SKEMA Publika to analyse influences and the issues they raise in various fields. This Paris-based international think tank affiliated with **SKEMA Business School** was launched in February 2022 with the aim of looking ahead to and reflecting on the societal and geopolitical transformations of tomorrow. It fuels public debate and issues recommendations for national and international decision-makers.

The theme of this new conference is *Francophonie*: the French-speaking world. For history shows that there is a complex link between influence, power and language. Today, the number of French speakers in the world is growing. The most optimistic forecasts estimate that this number, 321 million in 2022, will rise to 600 million by 2050.

And yet, between politics, economics, culture, education and sport, **will Francophonie continue to exert an influence, particularly for France? Does it need a new lease of life?** With our speakers and guests, we tried to pinpoint possible answers, always keeping one question in mind: what can be done?

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TALK ABOUT FRANCOPHONIE AND INFLUENCE TODAY?

Influence means the ability to convince people and get them to act without resorting to coercion. It is a sub-category of power – power that involves *no constraint*. This definition highlights the relational nature of influence, echoing Raymond Aron's observation in his book *Peace and War: a Theory of International Relations* that "power is not absolute: it is a human relationship."¹

¹ Aron, Raymond, *Peace and War: a Theory of International Relations* (1962), Routledge, 2003

The question of language, a signifying medium enabling individuals to express themselves, communicate and act in a coordinated way, naturally arises when we address the issue of influence. Influencing primarily involves interacting, and interaction is facilitated by a common language. But **a language is never neutral, for as a political object and as a “State’s visiting card”, it conveys a certain vision of the world, a set of values, constituting both a descriptive tool and a prism of interpretation.**

In this context, various recent events – like the end of the military cooperation between France and Niger and the closure of the French programmes taught in private Algerian schools – have led us to question the future of *Francophonie* in a global context. Even within Europe, the link between the Francophone world and its ability to influence is being called into question, as illustrated by an article in *The Spectator* on “the long defeat of the French language”² Despite France’s hopes, Molière’s tongue has not once again become the working language of the post-Brexit EU. Worse still, some French speakers, and various French people in particular, are themselves guilty – occasionally, at least – of French bashing, thus helping to weaken the status of French in international bodies. Though stopping short of its deliberate denigration, the lack of a determined use of this language in multilateral or bilateral negotiations – between French and Chinese counterparts, for example, using interpreters – and the use of “Globish” (global English) as a substitute medium also contribute to reducing its power of influence, and can lead to exchanges that are difficult to understand when technical aspects are addressed.

It is thus worth asking whether *Francophonie*, i.e. “all people who use French and are assumed to be Francophiles,”³ can still serve as a vector of influence, especially for France. This question gives rise to several related issues. Firstly, if the French language contributes to the power of French speakers and Francophone countries, where does this power lie? Is French a source of power for those who speak it or, conversely, does its strength come from the influence – political, economic etc. – of the countries where it is used? Furthermore, is it still legitimate to talk about “*Francophonie*” in the singular at a time when the organisations interested in it do not all have the same perception of it or share the same ambition? Not to mention the divergent points of view of the countries making up the Francophone world – an “institutional arrangement organising relations between countries that share the French language,”⁴ within which demographic dynamics could reshuffle the cards of influence. Lastly, as the French language itself has many forms, wouldn’t envisaging *Francophonie* as a single reality mean subscribing to a certain ideology? A rationalist aspiration similar to the utopia of Esperanto, probably arising from the desire to return to a mythical Babel forever lost.

Calling on a wide range of players from different backgrounds, SKEMA Publika’s “*Francophonie* and influence now and tomorrow” conference was an opportunity to discuss political, economic, cultural and sporting viewpoints, resulting in various observations and recommendations on the future of *Francophonie* as a vector of influence.

ECONOMIC FRANCOPHONIE: A NEED TO INNOVATE

We certainly associate the idea of *Francophonie* more readily with the political and cultural spheres than with economic activity. But we wanted to give the economic aspect of *Francophonie* a central place in the discussions inspired by our conference. Because while recent geopolitical events suggest that the French-speaking world is running out of steam as a vector of influence, particularly in Africa (as witness France’s setbacks in Mali and Niger, for example), **the actual economic situation seems to paint a very different picture.**

² West, Ed, “The long defeat of the French language”, *The Spectator*, 15 July 2023, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-long-defeat-of-the-french-language/>

³ Vie Publique, “Francophonie et rayonnement culturel”, 1 April 2020, [Francophonie et rayonnement culturel | vie-publique.fr](https://vie-publique.fr/francophonie-et-rayonnement-culturel)

⁴ France Diplomatie, “La Francophonie, espace de coopération multilatérale”, March 2023, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/Francophonie-et-langue-francaise/la-francophonie-espace-de-cooperation-multilaterale-63438/#sommaire_6

The French-speaking economic area now accounts for 20% of world trade and 16% of world GDP, making French the third most widely used business language after English and Mandarin, although only ranking between 5th and 7th in terms of the number of speakers. **It is thus important to take the pulse of the economic *Francophonie* beneath the political symptoms.**

Like the 1,100 m² of commercial space operated by the Lagardère Group since the opening of Dakar's Blaise-Diagne international airport in 2017, this sector is doing well and can notably rely on Africa's growing middle class, which at around 340 million people is now commensurate with those of China and India. We should note that to properly identify the size of this section of the African population and assess its needs and aspirations accurately, we need to factor in the informal side of the continent's economic activity, dubbed "making do" by one of our speakers. Only in the light of these observations can we qualify the supposed disenchantment with France and the French-speaking world felt in Paris, and understand where the very real demand for French products comes from, particularly from supermarkets (Carrefour, Casino, Système U, etc.), in Libreville, Dakar, Abidjan and Yaoundé. For in economic terms, *Francophonie* is perceived locally as a guarantee of quality in comparison with its competitors.

The vitality of the economic Francophonie is thus a godsend in terms of influence. It shows that French is a language of opportunity for not only individuals, but also institutions and organisations. It is true that for individuals, English maximises the linguistic possibilities. But in collective terms, no language, no matter how widespread, can meet the needs of every situation. We will come back to this.

While the economic *Francophonie* is an opportunity, it needs to be seized proactively and involve innovative projects, otherwise it will leave room for other competitors (English-speakers, the Chinese, the Germans, etc.). This is what is happening on French-language TV channels, where the feature films shown after the 8 pm news are now almost systematically American. With the decline of the Francophone film industry, due to lack of investment, TV audiences are also losing sight of the culture, values and principles conveyed by the French language.

Just as the increase from 321 million to 600 million French-speakers will only materialise if enough resources are allocated to it, the influence of the Francophone economic area will only continue if we keep it alive. **In this respect, it is vital to work towards the greater integration of Francophone economic systems and policies by lowering tariff and non-tariff barriers.** The European Union can certainly do this, as can Africa.

The GPF (Francophone employers' association) fosters exchanges between companies and economic players from different French-speaking and Francophile countries precisely to inject energy into Francophone business. The role of France's CCE (foreign trade advisors) is also important: 4,500 businessmen and women work as volunteers to advise public authorities, provide support to firms, train young people in international business and promote the attractiveness of France in order to boost the economic *Francophonie*.

Lastly, as the economy cannot flourish without mobility, developing the Francophone influence means making it easier for people to move around and meet each other within this linguistic area. Some Francophone institutions have already taken this on board, like the APF (Francophone parliamentary assembly), which we will talk about later. But before that, we need to take a brief look at the Francophone world in terms of culture.

CULTURAL FRANCOPHONIE: THE EXAMPLE OF EDUCATION

In addition to the media (e.g. RFI, France 24, MCD and TV5 Monde, linked with France Médias Monde), the 834 Alliances Françaises (with local association status) and the 98 Instituts Français ("cultural branches" of diplomatic missions abroad) whose task is to promote the French language and culture, the French school network abroad is one of the key tools of influence diplomacy in terms of cultural *Francophonie*. Created in 1990 to coordinate and manage this network, the AEF (agency for French education abroad) has a twofold task, carried out under the supervision of the MEAE (Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs): (1) the education

of French children abroad and (2) educational cooperation with host or third countries. This approach is aimed at observable medium-term benefits for France and the French-speaking world.

In 2023, **the French education network abroad contained 580 establishments (up from 566 in 2022) in 139 countries, with almost 395,000 pupils enrolled, one-third French and two-thirds of other nationalities.** Not all these schools have the same status: only 68 are managed directly by the AEFÉ; 161 have signed an administrative, financial and educational agreement with the AEFÉ and are managed by private-law associations or foundations, and 351 have signed a partnership agreement with the Agency, while managed by private-law bodies. However, what they all have in common is approval from the French Ministry of Education, meaning that students who receive the teaching provided can move from one school to another without having to take an exam. This is a real advantage for expatriates. The Ministry's approval attests to compliance with the principles, curricula and teaching organisation of the French education system – and it is possible to include classes on the host country's language and culture in the curriculum.

It is estimated that around 50% of the students who have attended French schools go on to higher education in France – if the vagaries of world events permit. Other obstacles to a higher conversion rate include (1) distance and geographical remoteness (from Latin America, for example); (2) difficulties in obtaining visas (particularly for young Africans), and (3) the desire, after several years in the Francophone system, to experience a different one, meaning that an English-speaking country is often preferred.

It should be noted that in order to achieve its ambitious objective of doubling pupil numbers in ten years (between 2020 and 2030) to a total of 700,000 individuals enrolled in one of the network's schools, the AEFÉ is opening up to private schools as partners. **However, this privatisation risks further increasing the inequality in terms of access already observed, due to ever-rising tuition fees.** These increases have not been balanced by sufficient rises in the grants paid to French families on the basis of social criteria. And this has led to a decline in the social mix within AEFÉ schools. This is undoubtedly a consequence of the pragmatic strategy adopted by the MEAE in terms of influence, particularly as regards the positioning of French lycées abroad as *international lycées*, aimed at attracting the local elite – as we shall see later on.

But before touching on the public policies developed in this area, the side effects of the above-mentioned French education network abroad mean emphasising how vital associations and civil society are to the success and influence of *Francophonie*.

THE KEY ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Not all French people abroad are expatriates – in fact, their numbers are falling. These French people blend into the society of the country in which they live. Yet their contribution to the life of the Francophone world is essential. This is illustrated, for example, by the FLAM (French as a mother tongue) scheme. As not all French families abroad are necessarily able to send their children to a French-speaking school, the FLAM scheme groups together associations that offer French-language activities for children attending local schools. Set up by parents or associations of French people abroad, they are designed for all French speakers, not just French nationals, and enable them to maintain a link with the French culture and language.

Likewise, associations recognised as being of public interest – **such as the UFE (union of French people abroad), whose task is to welcome, help and bring together French people and Francophiles, and the ADFE (“Français du monde” French democratic association),** which defends the rights of French people living abroad – often work alongside consulates, which have fewer and fewer resources and are sometimes overwhelmed.

The APF (Francophonie parliamentary assembly) is probably less familiar to the public than the OIF (international *Francophonie* organisation). With its member sections representing 87 parliaments or interparliamentary organisations, the APF works alongside the OIF to promote the French language and Francophone cultures, boost solidarity between Francophone parliamentary institutions and promote good

practices in democratic governance. As a parliamentary assembly, one of its objectives is to represent the interests and aspirations of *peoples* in the Francophone sphere to the *Francophonie* bodies. We can cite two illustrations of its actions here. Firstly, its contribution to legal harmonisation in the Francophone world. This may be unattainable in the absolute, but it is still desirable to work towards it, so the **APF encourages its members to legislate on subjects of common interest and share their legislative experiences with the rest of the Assembly**, so as to help stakeholders without the necessary skills or resources. Secondly, echoing what has been said about the economic *Francophonie* and with a view to the *Francophonie* summit to be held at the Château de Villers-Cotterêts in late 2024, the APF plans to draft a guideline that will solve the visa issue problem and improve citizen mobility in the French-speaking world.

These players, along with those already mentioned – the **GPF (French-speaking employers' association), the CCE (foreign trade advisors) and many others (Campus France, CIAN, AUF, AFAL, FIPF, etc.)** –, make up a rich, diverse network of Francophone organisations. They underline the essential role of civil society, in particular citizens, in promoting and advancing the interests of *Francophonie*. So the future of this world as a vector of influence – its vitality – depends largely on the ability of individuals to come up with ideas, including outside established institutions. However, the sheer number of organisations and schemes mentioned raises a risk of insufficient clarity from the Francophone ecosystem. **In fact, one of the speakers said that “every time we talk about Francophonie, I discover a new player” – adding that “we need to get everyone around the table.”** This is what the SKEMA Publika think tank has attempted to do through this conference, so that the viewpoints expressed can be mutually enriching.

PUBLIC POLICY REGARDING FRANCOPHONIE

The MEAE (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs) has drawn up a realistic, pragmatic policy for *Francophonie* based on a number of observations.

Firstly, while the French language is undoubtedly a “vector” language, i.e. it (1) “has a global dimension as a language of international communication” and (2) “provides opportunities” (in terms of exchange, trade, employment) for individuals and organisations, **any attempt to compete with English (1.3 billion speakers) in quantitative terms now seems doomed to failure** and, from this point of view, competing for hegemony in terms of influence is a matter of “game over”. For example, 80% of top scientific journals are in English. Whatever the subject studied, not publishing in English means not existing on a global scale, and this applies to physics, economics and political science.

Secondly, through the figure of 321 million speakers was mentioned earlier, French is spoken as a “real” mother tongue by only around 100 million people throughout the world and French as a commonly used language represents no more than 250 million speakers.

So we should have no illusions about the nature of native languages and the French language skill level of Francophone populations that are traditionally multilingual, particularly in certain African countries, even if French is still the language of education there. This is why the MEAE's Sub-Directorate for the French language and educational cooperation is right to fund teacher training programmes in these French-speaking regions, where the quality of teaching can suffer if teachers are not trained *in French*.

But though it cannot compete quantitatively with English, French remains a language with interesting opportunities in terms of quality. As well as opening up a wealth of possibilities for individuals and organisations alike on five continents, French, when recognised as an official language in countries where it is statistically only a second language, often gives a certain fringe of the population **access to the “formal” economy** and salaried employment. This is the case in Morocco, where it is estimated that 10% of the population speak everyday French (though it is not their mother tongue), but where all the businesses use French and university courses are taught in French – which causes problems in terms of equality. While English may attract more Moroccans today, mainly because it is linked in the collective imagination with the possibilities offered by the Gulf countries, the reality is that, because of the *French substratum* inherited from history, the

French language constitutes an unrivalled opportunity in the landscape "accessible" to these individuals. Dubai is within the reach of 0.5% of the Moroccan population, but French could expand their possibilities for 40% to 50% of it. This is because for an ordinary Moroccan, speaking good English is a difficult goal to achieve, mainly because of the lack of resources (few qualified teachers), but also because it is a language divorced from anything in the familiar world, where French is spoken on a daily basis by 10% of the population and the Moroccan dialect is full of French idioms. Moroccans who learn French thus learn a second language that is part of *their own world*, whereas English requires them to *change worlds*.

If French is to continue as a vehicle for meaningful opportunities, public policy on *Francophonie* needs to focus on the *offering*: people must be able to learn French and even to learn *in French*. This is the aim of the Alliances Françaises and the Instituts Français. Other countries have followed our lead in this area, as witness the Confucius Institutes. **Here, France has a head start, with a long-standing, well-known network that is admired most of the time.**

In the future, France's influence will depend on attracting thinkers. Its target should be the upper middle class: the 10% who represent future journalists, future university teachers, future employees of large companies – but not necessarily their shareholders; not the 1%. For this elite, speaking English is now a non-negotiable requirement. So they need to be able to speak English *and another language*: French. **In an era where the middle classes also speak English, French needs to be seen as a differentiating asset, a competitive advantage. This is where we need to be: we need to highlight the multilingual dimension of French schools, making them international schools where people can learn French as well as English. This is why the MEAE is currently working with the AEFE to develop the image of the "international French lycée" and make a qualitative impact on the upper middle classes.**

POSSIBLE AVENUES FOR THE FUTURE

The development by the MEAE of an offering policy designed to boost the attractiveness of the French language and culture is in line with several comments made by participants on the need to revitalise *Francophonie* at institutional, organisational and civic levels. Whether the president of an NGO working in the education sector in Madagascar or a partner in a law firm, **our guests unanimously recognised the need to "raise interest in things French" in order to give new life to the Francophone world. For efforts to produce results in this respect, it is essential not to stick to a purely administrative, "Prussian-style" logic, but to address the "heart" and the soul of Francophones by constructing a narrative they can relate to.** We need to make people dream by playing on the imaginative aspect of things French. From this point of view, the closure of the prestigious ENA (national school of administration) – a guarantee of excellence open to a privileged few – was symbolically a terrible message for the elite of Francophone countries who aspired to be trained there.

However, the question-and-answer session brought out **a very important point as regards the approach adopted by the MEAE: in order to create a liking for *Francophonie*, it is essential not to target the elite alone, but to make it accessible to everyone.** To maintain this natural association of quality with *Francophonie*, while making the latter a more accessible linguistic space, we could invest more in fields like luxury goods and fashion: real figureheads in France's culture and economy. In this respect, the stillborn project for a French-language *Vogue Afrique* was certainly a missed opportunity, illustrating the lack of institutional support for certain structures. As well as appealing to the general public, this project would have been a chance to nurture people's dreams by moving towards a genuine model of co-construction, co-investment and co-production with local partners, as French companies should be doing. It would have shown that "to win, we don't have to make a loser".

The success of *Francophonie* as a vector of influence will thus depend on its ability to generate benefits locally, for the Francophones "of the future", not only Francophones "with roots". On an individual level, a model system in this respect is the international co-supervision of theses, which fosters the mobility of doctoral students and gives them access to the input and resources of two thesis supervisors at two universities in

different countries. In the Francophone world, for example, doctoral students in comparative law can benefit from French legal knowledge and know-how while taking a genuine interest in the law and legislation of their country of origin. By acting as a bridge between Francophone institutions, this scheme helps to strengthen not only stakeholders' relations but also their skills. However, it remains a complicated tool to set up, and receives too little support to operate effectively.

Lastly, **the future of *Francophonie* seems inextricably linked to that of *Francophilia***. The saying that "the past is no guarantee of the future" is well-known in financial circles. In fact, the resources invested and the dynamic economic energy of certain Francophile regions seem to have achieved more for the progress of *Francophonie* in recent years than the legacy of history. **In Asia, for example, there is a growing interest in the French culture and language in countries like South Korea and Thailand**, in contrast to the lack of interest observed in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. **In Europe, a similar Francophile trend is noticeable in countries like Poland and Romania**. So we really to seize this opportunity. However, in addition to the economic dynamism of certain sectors like luxury goods and fashion, perhaps *Francophonie* should now "make people dream" through sport.

CONCLUSION: "RAISING INTEREST IN THINGS FRENCH": THE EXAMPLE OF THE SPORTING FRANCOFONIE

The idea of a sporting *Francophonie* is still relatively recent and much remains to be done to clarify the issues, stakeholders and values involved. However, work in this area could pay off in the medium term. If the number of French-speakers rose from 321 to 600 million, we would reach 300 million potential Francophone fans and practitioners, compared with 165 million today.

Hosting the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games is a golden opportunity in this respect for not only France's reputation, but also the influence of *Francophonie*. Earlier, we mentioned the need to appeal to the souls of Francophones and Francophiles: what better way to capture the imagination of spectators than through sport: a universal language *par excellence*?

But universal though it may be, sport can only be a real vector of the Francophone influence if it can be spoken about in French. So the first step is to stop using English terminology to describe and regulate sport, otherwise the disciplines cannot be explained to the greater majority. For example, journalists from the French-language media found themselves at a loss to comment on the snowboarding event at the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games. This situation has since prompted an effort to translate the technical terms associated with the techniques of this sport. The value of this approach is obviously not only linguistic. It is really a question of power within the international federations. What happened with the creation of the IFSC (International Federation of Sport Climbing) in 2007 must be avoided at all costs. Its statutes are in English, but its ancestor, the UIAA (Union Internationale des Associations d'Alpinisme), founded in Chamonix in 1932, was actually under Francophone control. The climate is also conducive to this type of project, since the French say they are increasingly irritated by the use of English terms when equivalent expressions exist in the language of Molière.

Although language plays a major role in the way a sport is practised – which varies from one country to another, depending on possible interpretations of the standards laid down – French alone will not be enough to promote the interests of the Francophone world within federations and committees. **Francophone and Francophile stakeholders need to be coordinated if they are to impact decision-making bodies**. This effort is decidedly important, since it can decide the outcome of international competitions. A case in point: on 16 October last year, the President of the French Rugby Federation pointed out France's lack of influence in World Rugby after the national team's defeat by South Africa in the World Cup quarter-finals, where the match involved some controversial refereeing.

At a time when major sporting events require greater resources and are now regularly staged by partner countries – as witness the awarding of Euro 2032 to Italy and Turkey –, cooperation between Francophone stakeholders could prove to be a major asset. However, it is crucial for this collaboration to mobilise the

entire Francophone ecosystem, including its economic side. For example, it was regrettable that the last Francophonie Games, held in Kinshasa in the summer of 2023, had only one French sponsor (Vivendi) for the catering, while companies from America, India, Turkey and other countries were present.

There is still a long way to go, but the goal is clear: to be a vector of influence in the future, *Francophonie* now needs to focus on firing people's imaginations.

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