

Developments on the horizon to 2050

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The French-speaking market will be profoundly transformed by 2050 under the effect of several developments.

The first is demographic. The growth of the African population will shift the centre of gravity of the Francophonie southwards. In 2050 French speakers will be predominantly African, young and urban. The Organisation internationale de la Francophonie notes that 62 per cent of daily speakers already lived in Africa in 2022, a dynamic on which the projections of 751 million French speakers in 2050 rest.¹

The second is economic. The French-speaking African economies, whose growth is driven by demography, resources and urbanisation, will see the emergence of middle classes and new fortunes, as well as considerable financing needs. The African Continental Free Trade Area, mentioned in Part I, could accelerate this development.

The third is linguistic. In several countries French faces competition from English, from Arabic and from the national languages. The Organisation internationale de la Francophonie notes that the future of French in Africa depends on conditions relating to education and has set up, with the support of its 88 members, a monitoring mechanism to counter the decline of French in international organisations.² The position of French in African business has yet to be won.

The fourth is technological. French ranks fourth on the internet, with the highest degree of digital globalisation after English, but the digital divide weighs on its progress.³ The digitalisation of financial services, African fintech and machine translation will change the conditions of access to the French-speaking market.

The fifth is geopolitical. Relations between France and several French-speaking African countries deteriorated during the 2020s, with diplomatic and military ruptures in the Sahel that have affected the image of French

in certain countries.⁴ For Switzerland, a French-speaking country with no colonial past in Africa, this development creates a singular position: it shares the language without carrying the legacy, which can be an advantage in relations with countries in search of new partners.

1 Notes

1. Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, 2022 edition, cited above; Actuailes, 14 January 2025, cited above. ↩
2. Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, 2022 edition, cited above. ↩
3. Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, 2022 edition, cited above. ↩
4. Human Rights Watch, 4 February 2025 (hrw.org): withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS, effective 29 January 2025 and announced a year earlier, the three juntas accusing the organisation of betraying its founding principles and of being under foreign influence; APAnews, 18 March 2025: the three states of the Confederation of Sahel States give notice of their withdrawal from the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, accused of being “an instrument of political control”; French was downgraded from official language to working language in Mali in 2023, in Burkina Faso in 2024 and in Niger in 2025. ↩

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