

The limits of the linguistic advantage

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The advantage of French has its limits, which Geneva's players must be aware of.

The first lies in the dominance of English in global finance. Markets, instruments, financing agreements, product documentation and the communications of international groups are expressed in English. A Geneva practitioner who commanded only French would be excluded from these fields. Chapter III will examine this tension.

The second lies in the diversity of the French-speaking world. French is the official or working language of countries whose cultures, institutions and practices differ profoundly. Although the common language eases communication, it does not dispense with the need to know each country.

The third lies in the evolution of French itself within the French-speaking countries. In Africa, French coexists with national languages whose use in business and public administration is growing. In the Maghreb, Arabic and English are gaining ground, while in Rwanda English has replaced French as the language of education.¹ The Organisation internationale de la Francophonie notes that multilingualism is being eroded in most international organisations, where documents circulate essentially in a single language.²

The fourth lies in machine translation, whose advances reduce the cost of communication between languages and could, in time, diminish the advantage of a shared language. This development, which Part K will touch upon, does not remove the value of direct understanding, of common legal concepts and of networks, but it alters the terms of the comparison.

These limits suggest that French should be seen as an advantage to be maintained, within a multilingual strategy in which English and German have their place. They do not reduce its value: in a world where the financial centre competes with English-speaking and Arabic-speaking

The limits of the linguistic advantage

centres, the ability to serve 396 million French speakers in their own language is an asset that few financial centres possess.

1 Notes

1. Decision of the Rwandan government of October 2008 making English the language of instruction at all levels, followed by the country's admission to the Commonwealth in November 2009; Kinyarwanda, French, English and, since 2017, Swahili are official languages; Université Laval, "Rwanda", L'aménagement linguistique dans le monde, axl.cefan.ulaval.ca (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, La langue française dans le monde, 2022 edition, summary, francophonie.org. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-the-limits-of-the-linguistic-advantage