

# Parlez-Vous Anglais? Yes, of Course.

By [Pamela Druckerman](#) Aug. 10, 2019

The hundreds of thousands of Americans descending on Paris during this year's tourist season are in for a shock: The city's waiters, bakers and taxi drivers — and practically anyone else they encounter — will mostly speak to them in eager, serviceable and occasionally even near-perfect English.

It's not just France. In recent years the number of Europeans who speak English — and speak it well — has soared. The EF English Proficiency Index, whose online test rates adults around the world, has found annual gains since it began in 2011. Of the 27 countries it ranks as highly or very highly proficient, 22 are in Europe. The French are still among Europe's worst English speakers, but they are desperate to improve.

English has been Europe's lingua franca since World War II, of course. But younger people in particular, from Stockholm to Slovenia, increasingly speak a nuanced English that can rival native speech. And it's only getting better: About [80 percent of primary school](#) students on the Continent study it (up from about 60 percent in 2004), and [94 percent of high school students](#) take English, far more than all other foreign languages combined.

Europeans have long watched English-language TV shows and movies, but in bigger countries like Germany and France these were usually dubbed. Now, they all binge-watch Netflix in subtitled English, a virtual English-immersion course. (One French podcaster recommended American sitcoms, with recurring phrases like "Are you breaking up with me?")

Never mind Brexit; earlier this year the Netherlands opened an [all-English](#)

commercial court. Gone, it seems, are the regional conferences conducted in "Globish" — the stilted, simplified version of English that used to be the norm. At the Paris co-working space where I rent a desk, my 20-something neighbors — a Colombian, a German, an Italian and a Frenchman — converse in nearly flawless English, a scene replicated in Copenhagen, Berlin and many other cities.

All this sounds like good news for native English speakers, but it may also be a threat. What does it mean for Brits and Americans when everyone from Dutch teenagers to Romanian hackers has mastered our mother tongue?

**Universities in the United States should watch out.** It won't be long before Americans realize that top European schools offer a fast-growing number of bachelor's and master's degrees, taught entirely in English, for a fraction of the price of many American schools, even if you add on overseas airfare. (In 2009, there were about 55 English B.A.'s offered in Continental Europe; by 2017, there were 2,900.)

Worldwide university rankings lay bare the choices: At Belgium's KU Leuven, ranked 48 in the world, students from outside the European Union pay 1,750 euros per year for a B.A. in business taught in English. At the University of Amsterdam, ranked 62, non-European Union students pay 9,300 euros per year for a B.A. in political science. America's and Britain's most elite schools still top the global rankings, but after that it's harder to justify the cost.

**We're a target.** When the world speaks excellent English, English-speaking societies become easier to decode and manipulate. Before the 2016 American elections, the Kremlin recruited young Russians whose written English was so good that they mostly passed for Americans on social media.

**But good ideas can spread faster, too.** Scientific papers have long been

published mostly in English; now social movements are Anglophone. This spring, a 16-year-old English-speaking Swede inspired kids around the world to protest climate change. (From Lisbon to Istanbul, their homemade signs were in English.)

**Native English may cease to be the gold standard.** Most people now learn English to communicate with other nonnative speakers — and even many of their teachers aren't native — so they acquire few expressions and idioms. The linguist Jennifer Jenkins describes a British TV interviewer asking a perplexed Italian opera singer whether his trip to England is "going swimmingly." She writes that, at European Union conferences, nonnatives who can easily understand each other's English switch on their translation headphones when someone from Britain or Ireland takes the stage.

**English will mutate.** A recent Irish conference on "World Englishes" included sessions on "Egyptian English as a new English variety" and "English in the linguistic landscape of Kazakhstan." The linguist Marianne Hundt of the University of Zurich says common errors like "we need to discuss about this" or "I want some advices" could enter native speech.

**Natives are losing their competitive edge.** A few jobs still require perfect English, but in the corporate world good English has become a basic requirement, not a personal selling point. "You just have the same skill as other people — it's like using Excel," says Kate Bell, of the EF English Proficiency Index.

Crucially, the ubiquity of English lulls us Anglophones into thinking that it's O.K. to be monolingual. It's not. I've been at Amsterdam dinners where everyone is speaking brilliant English, but the minute I leave the table they switch back to Dutch. If all we know is English, we won't know what the rest of the world is saying about us.

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## of "There Are No Grown-Ups: A Midlife Coming-of-Age Story."

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