

French activists launch legal case over English-only translations at Notre Dame

Group says Paris landmark contravenes laws requiring public buildings to translate signs into at least two other languages

[Kim Willsher in Paris](#)

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- A group of French-language activists has launched a legal action over signs at [Notre Dame](#) Cathedral being translated only into English and not any other language.

The association, which won a similar case brought against the Eiffel Tower, believes failing to include other foreign languages leads to the increasing global domination of English.

Louis Maisonneuve, a spokesperson for the [Défense de la langue française](#) (Defence of the French language), said the legal complaint was lodged with the Paris court on Monday, which was [international French-speaker day](#).

While campaigners are more generally opposed to the use of English words and terms in French documents, communications, signs and advertisements – among others – they say the signs at Notre Dame and other public buildings contravene the 1994 regulation requiring all public buildings to translate their signs and information into at least two other languages.

The 1994 [Toubon law](#) requires the use of French in official government publications, all advertising, in workplaces, commercial contracts and all state schools. It also requires a “double translation” of public signs and translated official documents into two foreign languages, usually English and one other, in order to promote multilingualism.

“It doesn’t specify which two languages, but the lawmakers who came up with the legislation didn’t want the English language to overtake French,” said Marceau Déchamps, from the [Défense de la langue française](#).

“They obviously thought that there was a risk this would happen. That, little by little, if the only other language used was English, then English would replace French. That was their reasoning. “

The association points out that certain information boards explaining the work to repair the cathedral, devastated by fire in 2019, are in French and English only. Its legal complaint cites Gen Jean-Louis Georgelin, who was appointed by the culture ministry to oversee the Notre Dame repair work.

Maisonneuve said the association had persuaded [Paris](#) city hall to add a Spanish translation to signs at the Eiffel Tower last November. “We threatened to take them to court. It took a year ... in the end they changed them all to include Spanish,” he said.

It has also complained to 20 other public bodies over their use of English, including in an advert by the national postal service La Poste for its banking service with the title “Ma French Bank” instead of Ma banque française.

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Legal action is also being taken against the Bouches du Rhône authorities for their “Pass my Provence” visitors’ scheme, the Sorbonne for describing itself on its website as a “business school”, the EPF engineering school for its sign “Creating the future together” and Charles de Gaulle airport for using bilingual signs in French and English.

The [Académie Française](#), the “official” defenders of the French language founded in 1634 and with 40 members known as “Immortals”, is famous for its long campaign against the creep of Anglicisms into French.

Its latest edition of [“Dire-ne pas dire” \(say-don’t say\) list](#) includes dark, as in “dark ages” – use “sombre, obscur, inquiétant”, it says – as well as wishlist, fake, Crazy Monday, sticker, Trojan horse, mass event, millénial, game, gamer and loser.

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