

Mind Your (Aviation) Language....

French words in aviation English

In aviation, English is a *recommendation*, not a law. Although English is common, we often hear other languages on the radio. Air traffic controllers in the Canadian province of Quebec are famous for speaking both French and English. Controllers in China speak Mandarin to Chinese pilots, and English to out-of-towners. This dual system is common in other countries too.

Why English?

In 1951, when international air travel really started to *take off*, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) recommended that English be the standard language for aviation communications. Why English? At the time, the US and UK manufactured and operated the majority of the world's aircraft.

What if Airbus had been building hundreds of airplanes in the 1950's?

Had Airbus been booming in the '50's, *Le Français* would likely be the international language of aviation. French was on the short list of languages being considered. France was undoubtedly the leader in the earliest days of aviation. It had the first designers and was the first to form independent companies dedicated to building aircraft. In fact, the French language provides many common aviation words considered 'normal' now in our aviation English language.

French in today's aviation English:

Mayday! The distress call for life-threatening emergencies, such as complete engine failures. It comes either from the French 'm'aidez' ('help me'), or possibly from 'm'aider', short for 'venez m'aider' ('come and help me').

Pan-pan! The next level of emergency down from a Mayday; used for situations that are serious but not life-threatening. The term comes from the French word 'panne', meaning a breakdown. (If you've ever learnt any survival travel French you may know the phrase 'Je suis tombe en panne' – I've broken down.)

Those early French designers also had an influence on the basic structural parts of the aircraft:

Fuselage comes from French *fuselé* – ‘spindle-shaped’

Aileron is French for ‘little wing’

Nacelle is from a French word for ‘small boat’

... and my favourite ...

Empennage comes from the word *empenner*, which means ‘to feather an arrow’

