France says 'non' to hashtags

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‘‘LE NEWS dans mon e-mail ce week-end? C’est cool, yes?’’

C’est definitely not cool, if you’re the French government department charged with keeping the language pure.

This country with an unhappy history of invasion now has to defend its mother tongue on a new front: social media.

The Ministry of Culture has announced that, from now on, Twitter ‘hashtags’ (words that link conversation topics on the popular social media service) should be referred to as  ‘‘mots-diese’’.

It’s the latest in a series of – often unsuccessful – attempts to de-Anglicise the internet. In 2002 websites were renamed ‘‘sites’’. In 2003 Francophones were ordered to call e-mail ‘‘courriel’’ – a word that stuck in Quebec and Belgium but not the home country.

In 2005 blogs were dubbed ‘‘bloc-notes’’, in 2006 podcasting received the long but poetic ‘‘diffusion pour baladeur’’, and in 2010 cloud computing was literally translated as ‘‘informatique en nuage’’.

The General Delegation for the French Language, which tackles these issues, takes its job seriously. Article 2 of the French constitution says ‘‘the language of the Republic is French’’, and the delegation says the pre-eminence of French vocabulary helps foster social unity inside the borders.

But despite centuries of stern instruction (and even a law requiring radio stations to play at least 40 per cent French language songs in peak hours), the French still prefer the sound of some English words. It’s not just technical talk: ‘‘deadline’’, ‘‘le week-end’’, ‘‘fashionista’’, ‘‘buzz’’, ‘‘burn-out’’,  ‘‘best-of’’, ‘‘prime time’’ and many others have crept into common use.

‘‘We are the laughing-stock of the world,’’ responded French tweeter Jean-Francois Naud to the news that he can’t call hashtags hashtags any more.And the news magazine Le Point predicted that ‘‘mot-diese’’ would be ‘‘another word which risks a rapid death’’.

Others have pointed out that ‘‘diese’’ is the word for the musical sharp symbol,  different to the hashtag symbol # (which the French call a croisillon).

Craig Moyes, a lecturer in French at King’s College London who recently published a book on the writer of the first modern French dictionary, feels mot-dièse is ‘‘too musical’’.Dr  Moyes says a lot has changed since the Academie Francaise was asked in the 17th century to put the language on a noble footing alongside ancient Greek and Latin.‘‘

The French  these days are much more inclusive, they’re more relaxed, so words from the new media, from computers and so on are often adopted wholesale,’’ he says. In Canada in 2011 the Quebecois tried to redefine a hashtag as ‘‘mot-clic’’.

‘‘But you can’t really impose words – you can suggest them, you could say perhaps why they might be better, but ultimately [popular] usage will decide,’’ Dr Moyes says. Of course sometimes there are other reasons the French prefer their own term, Dr Moyes says.

The computer term ‘‘megabyte’’, for example. ‘‘The problem is ‘byte’ [pronounced ‘beet’] means ‘cock’ in French and so megabyte means ...  well, it’s unintentionally rude.’’

And that’s why, in France, a megabyte is a mega-octet.

What the French should say

**Le Web** Toile d’araignee mondiale

**To-do  list:**Liste des taches

**Prime time** Heure de grande ecoute

**Le coaching** L’entrainement d’une equipe

**Le best-of** Le meilleur

**Source: academie-francaise.fr**