

# Linguistic diversity in france

Sociology



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“ La langue de la République est le français. ” Article 2 of the French Constitution, revised as recently as 1992, leaves no room for misinterpretation. France is not known as a multilingual nation, nor one with a well known multilingual history. However: The apparent linguistic unity of France hides a rather different reality of considerable linguistic diversity. (Laroussi and Marcellesi 1995, 85) The country’s monolingual facade hides a multitude of regional languages, whose speakers have faced chastisement and suppression for centuries.

An enormous amount of conscious manipulation by the powers that have governed France through the ages has led to the complex linguistic situation that can be found in France today. This essay will present an overview of the historical events which have led to France’s present day linguistic situation paying particular attention to the country’s regional languages and their status. Breton and Basque will be the two regional languages focused on.

French, the “ sole” language of the French Republic, is certainly one of the country’s most powerful and influential assets. France has exported the French language all over the world, resulting in between seventy million and one hundred and ten million native speakers and twenty-nine countries using it as their official language today. However before founding this global platform, French had to establish itself within its own country, a process far more complicated than one might think.

When the Romans began extending the frontiers of their empire to Gaul, an area which incorporates modern day France, Belgium, Germany as far as the Rhine and Switzerland from lake Geneva to lake Constance (see Lodge 1993, 39) they encountered a high level of linguistic variety. A mixture of Greek,

pre-Indo-European and Celtic languages as well as many other languages that linguists have little knowledge of to this day could be found. As the Romans took control of this area from the second century BC, there followed a period of romanisation, and with this, presumably, latinisation.

As put forward by Lodge: The rich archaeological record surviving from the Gallo-Roman period enables historians to trace the spread of Roman civilisation in Gaul in some detail (see Thevenot 1948). The process of latinisation undoubtedly followed the same paths as that of romanisation, but direct evidence related to the linguistic history of the period is scanty. [... ] In all probability the latinisation of Gaul was very gradual [... ] (Lodge 1993, 42) As Latin infiltrated Gaul, it most likely became influenced by the languages already present, resulting in a variety of non-standard Latins.

The Gallo-Roman period lasted for about five centuries, until the Barbaric Germanic invaders: the Franks, the Visigoths and the Burgundians invaded and took over in the fifth century A. D. leaving behind them a linguistic legacy. The vulgar Latin already present mutated with the arrival of these new linguistic influences and France, at this point, was the proprietor of a large number of different dialects. These dialects became clearly split between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries forming the dialectal divisions of France: the langues d'oïl in the North and the langues d'oc in the south.

This split came about as the northern half, from around Lyon upwards, said oil for 'yes', whereas the southern half said oc. (Davidson 2011, 110) Today, the langues d'oïl comprise French, Breton and Alsatian and the langues d'oc are made up of Occitan, Basque, Catalan and Franco-Provençal. The <https://assignbuster.com/linguistic-diversity-in-france/>

incredibly diverse linguistic platform present at this time still does not shed much light as to why French emerged as the single language of the French Republic. From this point, French emerges as an arguably “planned language”. (see Judge 1993) During the Old French Period, between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, the dialect of l’Île de France, the region which today incorporates Paris, grew in influence, particularly upon the languages of the North, but also on some South of the Loire. This dialect, Francien, replaced a number of dialects already in existence. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as the influence of Paris became more important, so too did its dialect. The invention of printing in the fifteenth century was a highly significant factor in the spread of Francien.

It is in the sixteenth century that we truly begin to see the manipulation of language in France, which has resulted in the complex linguistic situation present today. Although Francien had spread and was an important language in the country, the vast majority of the inhabitants of France had no knowledge of it and spoke a variety of regional languages and dialects. Direct linguistic legislation was introduced in an effort to regulate the linguistic situation. Signed into law by Francois I on August tenth 1539, the Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterets stated that all judicial acts must be carried out in Francien, in French.

Articles 110 and 111 state: `Et afin qu’il n’y ait cause de douter sur l’intelligence desdits arrests, nous voulons et ordonnons qu’ils soient faits et escrits si clairement, qu’il n’y ait ne puisse avoir aucune ambiguite ou incertitude, ne lieu a demander interpretation. Et pour ce que de telles choses sont souvent advenues sur l’intelligence des mots latins contenus

esdits arrests, nous voulons d'ores en avant que tous arrests, ensemble toutes autres procedures,... soient prononcez, enregistrez et delivrez aux parties en langaige maternel francois et non autrement. ' (Wartburg 1946, 145)

This legislation excluded not only Latin, but also all regional languages and dialects, and it is here that we see the first inklings of French gaining superiority over its minor neighbours. Through this law, as the language of public administration, French quickly gained importance and by the end of the sixteenth century had achieved a heightened linguistic status. Further language legislation came about in 1635 with the official founding of the Academie francaise, a body to encourage, standardize and manage French as a language in all aspects and to create a grammar and a French dictionary.

Then Vaugelas (1585-1650) [who was at the forefront of much of the Academie's early work] published his *Remarques sur la langue francaise* in 1647 which became a linguistic Bible, the very foundation of *le bon usage*. (Judge 1993, 11) French had now gained a huge amount of stature. It was the only language of the upper classes, royalty and the educated. Speakers of Breton, Basque, Alsatian, Catalan and all other forms of regional language and dialect were regarded as second class citizens, as they spoke the tongues of the masses. The derogatory term "patois" was used to describe this "crude" form of language.

In 1798, as the Ancien Regime was overthrown by the French Revolution, linguistic homogeneity and standardization became important issues. How could a country proclaim complete unity without being able to communicate

in a common language to all fellow Frenchmen? The executive of the first republic, Abbe Gregoire, sought to gain a better understanding of the linguistic situation, in a battle against the common patois, conducting a survey on the state of French in 1790 entitled " Sur la necessite et les moyens d'anteantir les patois et d'universaliser l'usage de la langue francoise. His results revealed that French was almost a foreign language in the majority of France. Though Gregoire was ignorant as to what they were speaking, describing Corsican as Italian and Alsatian and its surrounding dialects as German (see Luxardo 2000) he discovered that the vast majority of France's inhabitants were not speaking French. Only just under an eighth of the entire population spoke the language fluently. The results of Gregoire's survey led to the issue and ratification of a decree in 1794 declaring unilingualism in all areas of France.

The measures were no more extreme than the goal: the complete eradication of the regional languages that undermined France's unity: The monarchy had reasons to resemble the Tower of Babel; in democracy, leaving the citizens to ignore the national language, unable to control the power, is betraying the motherland... For a free people, the tongue must be one and the same for everyone... How much money have we not spent already for the translation of the laws of the first two national assemblies in the various dialects of France!

As if it were our duty to maintain those barbaric jargons and those coarse lingos that can only serve fanatics and counter-revolutionaries now! [Bertrand Barere, a member of the National Convention who had presided over the trial of Louis XVI] (Davidson 2011, 112) Military conscription, the

Improvement of communication networks and education became very important in the spread of the French language and the eradication of regional languages and dialects. Any soldiers conscripted into the army from all parts of France were forced to communicate in a common language: French.

Communication networks were improved and this increased Paris's, the centre from which standard French originated, influence over France. In 1832, primary education was established and by the end of the nineteenth century Jules Ferry, the Minister for Public Instruction, made it free and compulsory for all French citizens. The introduction of "progressive" education came simultaneously with the suppression of minority languages. No other language but French was allowed and French culture and pride was very much promoted within the classroom.

These factors had a huge influence on the growing dominance of the French language. Regional languages and dialects faced a bleak future. Brittany can boast one of the most unique and interesting cultures of France. However, Breton is one of the most diminished regional languages in France. It is most concentrated in Le Finistere, and is not, nor has ever been an official language of France. As with all minority communities, the increasing control of the state in all aspects of their everyday lives has subjected the Breton community to a process of linguistic and cultural assimilation into the mainstream of French society. (Davidson 2011, 88) Under the third, fourth and fifth French republics, Breton children caught speaking their native Breton in school, as opposed to French, were subjected to the humiliation of having to wear a symbol around their neck which displayed their offence.

Others had to do extra homework or received corporal punishment for their transgressions. In Davidson's book, a Breton looks back on his grandparents' experiences at school: My grandparents speak Breton too, though not with me.

As children, they used to have their fingers smacked if they happened to say a word in Breton. Back then, the French of the Republic, one and indivisible, was to be heard in all schools, and those who dared challenge this policy were humiliated by having to wear a clog around their necks or kneel down on a ruler under a sign that read: 'It is forbidden to spit on the ground and speak Breton'. That's the reason why some older folks won't transmit the language to their children: it brings trouble upon yourself. (Nicolas de la Casiniere, *Ecoles Diwan, la bosse du Breton*) (Davidson 2011, 113) Speaking one's native Breton tongue had so many negative repercussions that it was far easier to submit to the imposition of the French language, which greatly reduced the number of Breton speakers. The Basque language faced similar repression to Breton. Basque culture is one of great pride in a unique society which differs from the French and Spanish cultures surrounding its locale.

Their most apparent distinction is their language: The most obvious difference between the Basques and their neighbours in France and Spain is their extraordinary language which the Basques themselves call *euskera* or *euskara* depending on which dialect they speak. (Hooper 1986, 231) The most incredible feature of the Basque language is that, apart from individual words absorbed from French and Spanish, it displays no similarities with its neighbouring languages, nor any trace of romantic, or even Indo-European roots. There is thus an understandable pride in this exceptional language.



A language of antiquity, Basque certainly has important ancient roots. Many Basques believe that their language was once spoken all over Europe. Some even state the whole world once spoke Basque. According to Davidson: One theory even has Adam and Eve speaking Basque. (Davidson 2011, 122) The enormous sense of pride in this regional language did not prevent its decline at the hands of the French government. As in Brittany, children were forced not to speak their native tongue at school, but instead to communicate in the langue de la République. Failure to do so would result in punishment. ... ] it is schooling in French that has largely accelerated the process of debasquisation. (Laroussi and Marcellesi 1993, 88) The situation for regional languages was dire. However, the linguistic state of affairs with regard to these minorities improved slightly with the introduction of the “Loi Deixonne” in 1951 which allowed for the teaching of regional languages and dialects in the classroom. Though it was a step in the right direction, the law was criticised for being only tolerant, but not accommodating in the promotion of these languages.

Article 3 of the law states: Every teacher who so requests will be authorised to devote each week, one hour of activities to the teaching of elementary notions of reading and writing in the local idiom and to the study of selected texts from the corresponding literature. This teaching is optional for the pupils. (article 3, Deixonne Law, cited in Grau 1987: 161) (Oakes 2001, 181) This law allowed for Breton and Basque as well as all other native languages and dialects of France to be taught in schools. Extra teaching hours of the languages could also be allocated outside the curriculum.

The introduction of these languages into education slowly made allowances for non state-funded immersion schools to be set up in both regions: Diwan schools in Brittany and Ikastolas in Iparralde, the Basque region. In Brittany today, bilingual road signage can be seen. Due to the more important co-official status of Basque within the Spanish Basque country, Basque television, radio and newspapers are available. Though there is now a more sympathetic attitude towards the regions of France which had their original languages or dialects suppressed, the situation today is by no means ideal.

Breton, Basque and other regional languages do not have official status, nor are they ever used by the authorities. Even though article 75-1 that was added to the French constitution in 2008 states that regional languages are part of the patrimony of the state, their legal status is inappropriate given their historic relevance. France remains one of the few countries not to have ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. These languages still cower beneath the oppressive power of French and the apparent linguistic unity certainly does hide a little known linguistic diversity.

In a country with the maxim of “ Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite”, one is forced to wonder, as the language of the republic is French and French alone, where is this liberte and egalite in the suppression of the right to speak, learn and live one’s own language? Select Bibliography “ Constitution de la Republique francaise” in Assemblee nationale [<http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/connaissance/constitution.asp>] (accessed 19th March 2012) Davidson J. P. 2011. Planet Word, London: Penguin Hagege C. 1996. Le francais, histoire d’un combat, Boulogne-Billancourt: Editions Michel Hagege

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