

Foreigners from within? French school and regional languages between the 19th and the 21st centuries.

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Abstract

For a long time, the provinces of the Kingdom of France appeared to the central government as almost foreign lands, sometimes even adorned with a certain exoticism or savagery. Submitted to or attached to the kingdom over the centuries, they shared the fact that they brought together subjects of the King of France. But this common bond was not enough to hide many differences: in the government of these provinces, in the weights and measures or, of course, in the language used by the people.

The French Revolution establishes a new common bond. The peoples of France are no longer subjects, but citizens. The revolutionaries very early on raised the question of communication with all citizens and quickly adopted a language policy, as Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel showed in their book *Une politique de la langue* (1975). After an attempt to translate organic and legislative texts for citizens, the idea that it is necessary to use a common language quickly emerges. The particularity of this French language policy is, however, that, rather than considering that this common language can exist alongside regional languages, it is necessary that the latter, these "patois", disappear to give way to the national language.

If in 1794, Bertrand Barère already envisaged that the work of francization of the population should go through the school, it was during the 19th century, following various laws, from Guizot in 1833 to Ferry in 1881 and 1882 that the school institution began to effectively spread the national language.

From then on, pedagogues, inspectors and teachers searched for the best ways to teach French to the children of France, which gave rise to a number of pedagogical debates until the 20th century.

The need to produce French citizens through this educational and linguistic policy, which is based as much on learning French as on the dissemination of a « national novel » through history courses, is all the more important because some of the speakers of regional languages are considered, at least for those whose linguistic area is cross-border - Basque, Alsatian or Catalan - as likely to forge too close links with foreign powers.

Even if, after the First World War, French language undeniably won its battle against regional languages, the fact remains that they remain suspicious. It was not until the Carcopino decrees of 1941, then the Deixonne law in 1951, that regional languages were finally officially taught in French schools. But even then, the debates surrounding these texts show a long-lasting distrust. The preparatory debates for the Deixonne Law, in official bodies or in the press, show how sensitive the subject remains.

Neither the emancipation movements of peoples that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s and (that) allowed a certain revival, at least artistic, of regional languages, nor international policies (UNESCO, European Union) were sufficient to reverse this trend. The debates surrounding the signing of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages have regularly shown that any policy in favour of regional languages seems suspicious in France. In this context, the school institution, which has become the privileged place for the transmission of these languages, is in a way paralysed by a contradictory injunction: it must ensure the transmission of languages considered as a national cultural heritage, but without nevertheless allowing them to really exist in a society that consistently considers that the French language is threatened.

Keywords: France, regional languages, school, education, citizenship, language policy

The French Revolution and the establishment of a "language policy"

Under the monarchy, all the people in the kingdom of France had one thing in common: they were all subjects of the king. But there were significant differences between the different provinces: they did not have the same local governments, the same weights and measures, or the same languages. And this is even if, particularly since the Villers-Cotterêts order in 1539, the king's language, i. e. the French language, had normally become the administrative language. A large part of the local elites had therefore adopted French, but regional languages remained the languages of the vast majority of the population.

With the French Revolution, the king's subjects became citizens. But of course they continued to speak their languages. At first, the revolutionaries had to deal with this situation. This is why the decree of January 14, 1790 authorised the translation of laws and decrees "into all the languages spoken in the different parts of France". In this way, a number of translations of official texts have been made. A certain Dugas, from the Tarn, created a real agency in charge of translating laws and decrees in about thirty departments in the south of France.

The situation changed radically from 1794 onwards. Indeed, the translation policy appeared to be costly and ineffective. From that moment on, a whole discourse promoting the French language began to develop. This discourse, which makes French the only language capable of expressing ideas of freedom and equality, leads to the rejection of the regional languages that were then negatively referred to as "patois". The particularity of this French language policy is that, rather than considering that this common language can exist alongside regional languages, it is necessary that the latter, these "patois", disappear to give way to the national language.

On January 27, 1794, Bertrand Barère, as spokesman for the Comité de Salut Public, presented a report in which he identified the idioms perceived as posing threats to the Revolution because of their use by the enemies of the Republic. There were languages from other European countries: German, Spanish, Italian, English, but also a number of regional languages: Basque, Breton, Alsatian, Corsican.

"We have revolutionized government, laws, customs, morals, costumes, trade and thought itself; so we are also revolutionizing language, which is their daily instrument." said Barère. And : "Federalism and superstition speak Low-Breton; emigration and hatred of the Republic speak German; counterrevolution speaks Italian, and fanaticism speaks Basque. Let's break these instruments of damage and error."

Barère concluded his report by proposing in particular the appointment of teachers to teach French in departments that were not yet French-speaking and whose regional language was for him linked to the enemies of the Republic. This means that some regional languages such as Occitan were not yet concerned. But they were very quickly.

Another important character in this story is Father Grégoire. Grégoire was a member of the clergy who eventually joined the Third State. In 1790 he took the initiative to send a survey on the "patois" to the scientific societies of France. And he presented a report from this inquiry on June 6, 1794. For Grégoire, French is not only the language of the law that the sovereign People, supreme legislator, must know, but also the language of revenge against "people as it should". The latter will continue to monopolize all places in defiance of civic equality if French language does not spread among the population. And to spread among the population, the French language must eliminate the "patois". This report was entitled: "Report on the need and means to annihilate the patois and universalize the use of the French language".

It was therefore logical that, on July 20, 1794, Philippe-Antoine Merlin de Douai submitted a decree that the Convention adopted immediately. This decree imposed French as the only language of both public and private acts. The penalty for violating this provision was six months' imprisonment and dismissal.

As we can see, from 1794 onwards, the policy of the language of the Revolution consisted not only in imposing the French language but also in making the regional languages disappear. In the minds of legislators, the possibility of two languages co-existing is difficult to imagine. Above all, the question for them is: Why want to speak a language other than French, which has everything it takes to become a universal language since it carries the values of the Revolution? And why do we want to keep "patois" that have no dignity and whose use, which prevents the learning of French, perpetuates the inequalities of the Ancien Régime between those who knew the language of "people as it should" and others?

The school enters the game

That's when the school started to enter the game. Because it was this institution that had the power to teach French on a massive scale and to transmit the values of the Revolution. Not immediately, because these structures took a long time to put in place, but from the second third of the 19th century.

A first law, the Guizot law, in 1833, provided that "primary education necessarily includes moral and religious instruction, reading, writing, the elements of the French language and calculation, the system of weights and measures". But above all, the Guizot law provided that a primary school for boys should be created in each municipality with more than 500 residents, that each department should have a school to train teachers, and that an inspection body should be created. In short, it created structures that would make it possible to provide massive schooling for children in France (the Falloux law of 1850 also provided for the creation of a girls' school in municipalities with more than 800 inhabitants) and to teach them the national language.

But it was under the 3rd Republic that a decisive step was taken, notably with the 1881-1882 Ferry Laws, which made schooling compulsory for children aged 6 to 13, free and secular. From those years on, the school became the real place for learning French.

In fact, the French regions were considered as colonies to be conquered and preserved, as Paul Lorain explicitly stated in his *Tableau de l'instruction primaire en France à la fin de 1833*: "Should we be called a Vandal, we are of the opinion that we have to take a hard line in this ancient transmission of patois, and that each school is a French language colony in a conquered country".

This search for unity was based on language, but also on history and geography. It was at this time that what the French called the "national novel" was established. The aim was to teach primary school children a common history, made by heroes from ancient times. This picture of the history of France, from "Our Ancestors the Gauls" to the Revolution, suggested that France had always existed and that the French people had always been one.

A school book that had a great success under the Third Republic is *The Tour de France par deux enfants*. It was the story of two orphans from Lorraine who, after the 1870 war and the Prussian takeover of Alsace and Lorraine, left to join an uncle in Marseille while crossing the country. It has been published in 1877 and sold more than 7 million copies before 1914. The following is an excerpt which refers to the issue of regional languages. The two boys, André and Julien, are in the south of France:

"The hotel lady was a good old lady, who seemed so pleasant, that André, to please Julien, ventured to question her, but she only understood a few French sentences, because she spoke as many old local people did to the ordinary, the patois from southern France. André and Julien, who had risen politely, were all disappointed. The people who came in all spoke patois to each other; the two children, sitting apart and not understanding a word of what was being said, felt well isolated in this foreign farm. "Why don't all the people of this country speak French?" - It's

because not everyone could go to school. But in a few years' time, this will no longer be the case, and throughout France we will be able to speak the language of the country." "At that moment, the door opposite opened again; it was the children of the hotelkeeper returning from school. "André", Julien cried, "these children must know French, as they go to school. What a joy! We can talk together. »" (translated by us)

The Guizot and Ferry laws did not explicitly prohibit the use of regional languages. But the mission of the school institution was clear: first and foremost, it was necessary to learn the national language. This is what a school textbook in 1875 said, for example: "1 The language spoken by our parents, and in particular by our mother, is called the mother tongue; it is also spoken by our fellow citizens and by people who live in the same country as us. 2 Our mother tongue is French".

Not all pedagogues agreed on how to teach children the French language. Some thought that it was necessary to start from what the child already knew, from his mother tongue, to bring him to French. Others, such as Irénée Carré, thought on the contrary that it was necessary to consider that the child who arrived at school (at 6 years old, nevertheless!) knew nothing and that it was necessary to speak only French to him, as a mother would do with her baby: this was the "maternal method". We can imagine the frustration this could represent for children who already spoke one language and were given instructions in another language as if their true mother tongue had no value.

This devaluation of the regional language was of course transmitted from school to families. The latter thus became another aid to the spread of the French language and the abandonment of the regional language. First, because the school instilled in children the idea that their language was not a language, that it had no dignity. Secondly, because everyone understood that learning French was the key to social advancement.

A well-known symbol of this language policy is the "signal" also known as a "symbol" or "sign". It consisted in giving an object to the first child who would be caught speaking patois. He would then give it to another child who spoke patois, and so on. Anyone who was in possession of the object at the end of the day was punished. It was a process based on denunciation and humiliation and we have evidences that it existed at least until the Second World War in some places. It was not systematic, but we think it was quite widespread because we have so much testimonies about it.

From the decline to the return of regional languages to school

The decline in regional languages is not uniform. Some regions are becoming more French-speaking than others. But it is clear that the process of francization, from the beginning of the 20th century, is inevitable. As soon as entire generations of children have learned French and this learning has been accompanied by a more or less forced abandonment of their regional languages, those languages are logically destined to disappear.

It is therefore quite logical that, after the First World War, the issue of regional language teaching should appear more regularly in legislative debates. Indeed, as soon as they no longer represent a danger to the French language, we can once again consider studying them. Not at primary school, of course, which remains the exclusive domain of the French language. Moreover, in 1925, a circular from the Minister of Public Instruction, Anatole de Monzie, prohibited any use of regional languages in schools. However, in secondary and higher education, it is considered that regional languages and their literatures may possibly be objects of study. Not all of them: the study of Alsatian, for example, which is a German dialect, is not encouraged, because since Alsace's return to the French nation in 1918, the suspicion of separatism has been hanging over Alsatians.

The fact that certain separatist groups of regionalist movements in Corsica, Brittany or Alsace were encouraged in the 1930s by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy further intensified prejudices against regional languages during this period.

Moreover, this fear of separatism, i. e. the fact that a certain part of the population is considered not to be loyal to the nation and therefore appears as a foreigner from within, became very clear in 1941. In December 1941, decrees issued by the Minister of National Education, Jérôme Carcopino, authorised optional teaching of regional languages, within the limit of 1h30 per week, and outside school hours.

The situation was very particular: France was partly occupied by Germany and the Vichy regime led by Marshal Pétain was based on the values of rural France, on the "small homelands". There were strong reactions in the newspapers. Even before the publication of the Carcopino decrees, the newspaper *Le Temps* wrote in November 1941: "Let us be careful, however, not to raise problems that history has already solved, to raise quarrels, that of languages and dialects, for example, which have long since been calmed down... There are enough borders, unfortunately, in our country not to forge others."

After the war, all Vichy legislative acts were revoked. It was only in 1951 that a law - the only one to date - was passed in favour of teaching regional languages. The Deixonne law of January 11, 1951 was the result of years of negotiations between Breton, Occitan and Catalan militants on the one hand and officials of the Ministry of National Education and parliamentarians on the other. It also raised many objections during its elaboration.

On the first to oppose this law proposal, when it began to emerge in Brittany, was Maurice Deixonne himself. This socialist deputy, faced with a proposal from the alliance of communist and Christian-democratic deputies, said in 1947: "These gentlemen from the priests' and apparatchiks' houses are now submitting proposals for legislation to attack Jules Ferry's work and introduce regional languages as a war machine, a time bomb in the Republic's schools."

Deixonne, who became rapporteur for this law proposal in order to scuttle it, ended up defending it. But he had to face opposition from Ministry officials. Aristide Beslais, Director General of Primary Education, told the Higher National Education Council in February 1949: "If we gave in today on a front as sensitive as this one, our resistance would be compromised on the other fronts. Pass me that expression of a military nature, but I think it has some value here because it is a real struggle that we have to support." What Beslais and the other members of the Higher Council feared was that the fact of granting official teaching to certain languages such as Breton, Basque or Occitan would lead to identical demands in Alsace, which had been occupied by the Germans during the war and whose inhabitants were still feared not to consider themselves as French.

The same opposition appeared in the national press. For example, the writer Georges Duhamel wrote an article in *Le Figaro* in 1950 entitled "An attack on French unity" in which he mentioned Ireland: "If primary school accepts, tomorrow, the teaching of dialects and patois, we too may know something comparable to the painful Irish adventure". Deixonne had to make many concessions. In the end, the law adopted after three years of negotiations does not offer anything very revolutionary: volunteer primary school teachers can teach one hour a week the regional language to pupils who also volunteer, and outside normal school hours. A regional language test is organized in the baccalaureate for volunteer students, but the mark obtained does not count towards graduation, only to obtain a mention.

The only languages covered by the Deixonne Law are Breton, Occitan, Catalan and Basque. The languages considered most likely to be vectors of separatism should wait: the Corsican language was integrated in 1974, the Alsatian language in 1988.

What appears here is the fear of a state that has so much based its unity on a single language that it has come to fear the other languages spoken on its territory. The imposition of French on the entire population was certainly not a problem in itself. What has created a problem is that it has been imposed at the expense of regional languages rather than at their side. In so doing, this language policy has generated frustrations, pushed a part of the population, attached to its regional language, to consider itself as a population of second-class citizens, suspected of being less French than monolinguals or,

even better, of those who had voluntarily abandoned their language to adopt the national language.

The challenging renaissance of regional languages

It was in connection with this policy that the concept of "internal colonialism" emerged in regionalist circles in the 1960s and 1970s. This concept is based on the principle that the centre, Paris, exploits the outskirts of the country for its own benefit, as a metropolis does for its colonies. The imposition of a single culture, which came from this metropolis to these peripheries, is part of this colonization policy.

In 1981, the election of François Mitterrand, who had spoken out in favour of a policy favourable to regional languages during his election campaign, was a hope for regional language activists. But the results were considered disappointing. Their teaching has benefited from new opportunities, such as bilingual education, but the resources devoted to it have proved to be below the expectations of activists and, above all, this teaching has not been accompanied by a policy of linguistic re-conquest in the society. While education has gradually developed and consolidated in both public and private schools that practice language immersion pedagogy, it is not enough to compensate for the loss of speakers.

We might think that today things have changed. But mistrust of language claims remains very high. The Deixonne Law was repealed in 2000, but regulatory provisions have made it possible to develop the teaching of regional languages. However, this regulatory framework remains fragile because it does not really require the State to provide this education.

Since the revision of the Constitution in 1992, article 2 states that "the language of the Republic is French". This article, as constitutionalist Guy Carcassonne says, affirms something that has long been acquired. Its only function is therefore to "create an obstacle to the recognition, even if reasonable, of regional or minority languages".

The revision of the Constitution in 2008 made it possible to include an article, article 75.1, which states that "Regional languages are part of France's heritage". But the Constitutional Council ruled that this article did not grant any particular right to these languages. It is therefore only symbolic.

What we have seen since the debates on the signing of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1999, in particular, is that any policy in favour of regional languages seems suspicious in France. In this context, the school institution, which has become the privileged place for the transmission of these languages, is in a way paralysed by a contradictory injunction: it must ensure the transmission of languages considered as a national cultural heritage, but without however allowing them to really exist in a society that systematically considers that the French language is threatened.

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