

Langes de France: A Brief Overview

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A Map of Multilingual Europe

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Introduction

The Charter of European Regional or Minority Languages entered into practice on March 1st, 1998. With a goal of protecting and promoting historical languages spoken by minority populations in Europe, the charter signaled an overturn in the European language policy and an effort to rectify homogenous and harmful, nationalistic approaches to language policy previously taken by members of the Council of Europe. The earliest signatures of the charter occurred in 1992 in Strasbourg, France, the seat of the European Union. Following signatures, the charter was later ratified by twenty-five member countries. Almost thirty years later, however, the country of France has yet to ratify the charter born in its own de facto political capital.

A Brief History of Linguistic Diversity in France

The French Republic acknowledges only one official language, officially designated in its constitution. With over 267 million speakers worldwide (“*What are the most spoken languages?*”), the French language has been a historical symbol of *la République* since the end of the French Revolution in 1799, and was often weaponized by the government to ensure homogeneity and a sense of national belonging, particularly in regions which had been reclaimed by France during the Revolution and in which languages other than French were prevalent (see Harrison 2012, Vassberg 1993 for the case of Alsace). Regional languages ¹such as the *langues d’oïl* and the *langues d’oc* were not only indicative of lower class status, but were also considered a social and economic deterrent, and speakers of these languages viewed as ‘opting out’ of collective efforts to harmonize the different populations which constituted the new French national territory. Today, the strength of the post-revolution wave of linguistic nationalism in France has only been rivaled by that which followed the end of World War II in 1945. Regional languages such as Alsatian and Lorraine Franconian became targets of an upsurge in anti-German sentiment, and were removed from all national institutions, including schools, where French became once again the sole language of instruction across the country, in efforts to reunite a fatigued and fractured population. It was not until the early 1970s that France began to take some steps to formally re-acknowledge its national languages, reintroducing them into schools and other centers of culture.

The Languages of France Today

More than fifteen regional languages are spoken in France today, known collectively as the *Langues de France*. These languages include: Basque, Breton, Catalan, Corse, Alsatian, Lorraine Franconian, Flemish, Francoprovençal, the *langues d’oïl* and the *langues d’oc* or *Occitan* (*Langues de France*), all of which can be grouped under the family of Indo-European languages, apart from Basque, whose origins can only be speculated. According to a report commissioned by the Ministry of Culture in 2016, the most widely spoken of these languages were Alsatian (548,000 speakers), Occitan (526,000 speakers), and Breton (304,000 speakers); however, the SIL International Ethnologue has also categorized Occitan and Breton as endangered languages

¹ For the purposes of this paper, “Regional languages” are defined as the languages traditionally spoken in the country of France prior to French. Migrant, or minority languages, as well as languages spoken in French territories are not included under this definition. French sign language is not recognized as a regional language or *langue de France* but as a “*langue à part entière*”.

in France (“*How many languages are endangered?*”). This paradox could likely be attributed to the difficulty in qualifying speaker-ness, particularly in the context of research. Who or what constitutes a ‘speaker’? What proficiency is necessary to “speak a language fluently”? Who has the power to determine one’s language status? The fluidity of salient terms such as *fluent*, *native*, *proficient* and *speaker* represent constant negotiations in the domain of sociolinguistics and render broad-spectrum statistics research immensely difficult. Additionally, other limitations, such as the methods used for gathering statistics and contacting speakers may account for some inconsistencies across data reporting. In the context of both reports, it should be noted that neither provided an explicit definition for ‘endangered’² or ‘speaker’.

Conclusion

While the linguistic diversity of France may seem somewhat insignificant in number when compared to countries such as Papua New Guinea or Indonesia, each claiming home to over 700 languages, the heritage of French regional languages is unique in their export. Old Occitan was spread widely across Europe between the 11th and 12th centuries through the traditional music of troubadours, which represents an essential contribution to early music still studied by scholars and linguists today. When taking a road trip through the state of Texas, you might just happen upon the town of Castroville, an area settled by Alsatian immigrants in the late 19th century, which has retained significant connections to its cultural heritage and where the Alsatian language is notably still spoken today. Some status has been returned to the *Langues de France* in their denotation as languages (rather than dialects) in their own right. However, further advocacy for language revitalization efforts promoting the linguistic diversity of France (in all of its forms) and more widely, in Europe, remains necessary as the country continues to endorse competency in French and English as indispensable, regularly placing both languages on the frontlines of national rhetoric and policy.

² The report commissioned by the Ethnologue makes reference to its use of Lewis and Simon’s 2010 Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS), a 13 point scale categorizing a language’s status, from widely used to extinct. However, at no point on the scale is the word “endangered” employed, leaving some room for questioning in the consistency of terminology and methodology used in the report.

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