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## THE LEADING REGIONAL LANGUAGES OF FRANCE

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Through the history of France, it is to be remembered that in 1790, only 25% of the French population had a good knowledge of the national language and a third of the population ignored it totally. This fact, viewed as a source of inequality, became an important concern at the time of the Revolution, and French speaking State Schools were created (Law of 1793). In 1870, still a large number of French people living in the countryside were not, in fact, able to understand nor speak the official language. So it proved necessary to impose an exclusive use and teaching of the French language in the whole country in order to accomplish National Unity. Banishing the use of dialects in the schools was therefore the only way to improve the situation. This was enforced with the laws of 1880-1881.

After World War II, the approach changed, since the situation was quite different - especially among the younger population - and a new interest developed for local language, including at the official level. In 1951, the DEIXONNE LAW authorized the teaching, in any school, of four of these languages : the "Basque", "Breton", "Catalan" and "Occitan" (including "Provençal"). This came slowly and was not widely instituted until 1966 when it became more frequent, primarily in the areas where these languages had always been of general use.

Several laws and decrees followed, concerning public schools at each level, including higher education, in 1966, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1974 and 1975. Each one increased the possibility and availability of these special teaching programs.

The 1974 law added the "Corse" (Corsican language) to the four already accepted local languages.

The law of 1975 indicated that not only the languages but also the particular cultures of these regions should be studied in every aspect : History, geography, literature and arts, economy and social sciences, natural history, architecture, agriculture, folklore, environment, ...etc.

Today, the French government is perfectly aware of the importance and the need of preserving these valuable and abundant cultural inheritances. Therefore, the official attitude is to assist and promote the teaching of its knowledge. In a recent television interview, (June 18, 1976), President Giscard d'Estaing declared himself extremely in favor of the conservation of all and every French culture; that it would be very sad if some of their local aspects vanished, and that laws were there to prevent these losses if possible. However, for the sake of freedom, it would be impossible to impose a systematic teaching. To make teaching available, to anyone who wishes it, is therefore the aim of the National Education System.

There are, however, considerable obstacles preventing a wider teaching of these languages and cultural patrimonies. The main ones - besides the fact that French school children already have heavy schedules and programs - are : a lack of funds, a lack of properly trained teachers, a certain bureaucracy which slows the processes and, at certain levels, some political reserves; then, (last but not least), the fact that these languages are not really standardized, as you would see in furthering the analysis of each one of them. Linguists have numbered the variety of dialects in France to more than 600.

Several actions have been taken in order to overcome these obstacles : - public schools (with function on government funds) must provide regional language teaching in certain areas, and anywhere in France whenever a minimum of 10 students, or parent's students, request it.

- training programs for teachers are provided, for elementary school teachers, high school teachers (1.500 of them for the year 1975) and professors of higher education. The teachers

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take these programs on an optional basis (except for catalan which is compulsory for mastering in Spanish language). There are language training programs, cultural training programs and mixed programs. These groups very often establish educational material.

To go a little further into details for each of these languages :

- Basque: Preservation is extremely successful. Local committees, parents associations and educational associations contribute to the funding and needs in voluntary personnel. Schools and universities deliver credits for its learning. Courses are available at no fee in southwestern France and in Paris. Basque comprises four various dialects; however, written basque is already standardized and scholars are working towards uniforming the grammar, an estimated 80.000 people speak "basque" in France, and 600.000 in Spain.
- Breton, a language of celtic origin, is in active expansion, and a revival of its use can be observed among young generations. It is spoken by about 700.000 people in French Brittany and taught from kindergarten through university. A number of non tuition day and evening courses are available for adults as well, through mail, radio and ~~magazines~~. Books and cassettes are published. One particular program sold 15.000 copies in 1975. Eight cultural associations are dedicated to the preservation of Breton culture. The four basic dialects (70 varieties of which could be distinguished) are brought back to two ways of teaching.
- Occitan, a gallo-roman language, is the most widespread of the local languages. About two million people among the population of 13.000.000 in this southern area uses it. Considerable educational material, several cultural associations and a large number of courses are offered to the public. Occitan is taught in 17 countries besides France, and all over France at each level. Summer sessions and workshops are public. The several varying dialects (4 main ones) totaling 160.000 words, have been standardized in two forms of spelling (Occitan and Provençal) and one grammar established in 1936, reprinted in 1976. The literature of Frédéric Mistral (1830-1914) and his efforts, with the "Félibrige" Association, helped to unify these languages of "Oc".

- Catalan, is of ibero-roman origin. More than in France itself, its use is especially widely spread across the Spanish border where an everyday use and a revived literature in the 19th century helped maintain it. One of the three dialects is used in a limited area in France by near 200.000 people. It is taught in several elementary schools, some high schools, two universities, with summer sessions and day and evening courses. In fact, the University of Perpignan is said to be developing into a "franco-catalan" center of studies, as well as other universities are for other languages. As above mentioned, some credits in Catalan are required in order to master in Spanish.

- Corsican, of italic origin, is rarely used on the continent. Its two main varieties are still the common language of more than half the population (amounting to 200.000 people) of Corsion. It first not considered by the Deixonne Law, corsican was, however, taught in a French University (Lix) and, since 1935, in several private institutions. In 1972-1974, the French Government included corsican among the regional languages to be taught in public schools. Its teaching has been greatly increasing ever since (there are 12 adult schools on the Paris area) but is obviously more widespread in Corsican itself where it is taught in each of the 236 educational public institutions, up to 10 hours a week, and in continuing education courses. Seminars are held on the island for anyone who wishes to take them. Most of the cultural events related to corsican culture take place on the island.

- Other "smaller languages" are - although fully respected - ignored in public education for the single reason that nobody ever requested their teaching. It is so, for instance, for the "Flemand" (Flemish language) which, although still spoken or understood by 80.000 people in northern France, has decreased in use in our country and is more and more considered as a foreign language, used primarily as one of the two official languages of Netherlands. It is, however, taught at the university level in the city of Lille.

"Alsatian" is not considered as a regional language either, but rather as a particular dialect. It is not offered in public French schools, the main reason being the already, general bilingual teaching (French/German) in this part of France.



To summarize, we can consider that on the average, teaching of each one of the five regional languages of France, with its cultural aspects, is available (although never compulsory for students except once they have registered) on a basis of 1 hour a week at the elementary level, 1 to 3 hours a week in junior high school, 3 hours a week in high schools, and at will at the higher education level. In 1975, nearly 9.000 high school students took one of these ~~five~~ French Regional languages for graduation exams, in addition to the one compulsory foreign language and the second or third optional foreign languages to be chosen from a list of 49. A number of books and studies are continuously published, in and on each one of these languages. Official committees are actively working for their promotions and researching to improve teaching methods. Documentation centers are being set up and the French Ministry of Education, as well as of Culture, has a special endeavour to assist the ~~any~~ private cultural associations that flourish in each area where a particular language is spoken and in main French cities. The widening of teaching in public education has proved to be an incentive for museums to expand and deepen these fields of studies, for publications to promote the knowledge of these cultures and, consequently, for the public to bestow a new attention to their conservation or revival.