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One and indivisible? Rethinking French national identity through its regional languages

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the paradoxical coexistence of Standard French and *France's langues régionales* within a republican framework historically committed to linguistic assimilation. It addresses the central question of how these languages survive and interact in a legal and social environment designed to ensure the supremacy of French. Through a critical analysis of France's political-legal history, from the absolutist ideology of the French Revolution to the restrictive constitutional interpretations of the 21st century, the study examines the mechanisms of state-led linguistic suppression and the corresponding strategies of community-led revitalization. The findings reveal that this coexistence is not a stable equilibrium but a dynamic and deeply asymmetrical struggle. While the French state relegates regional languages to the symbolic status of "heritage," denying them substantive rights through its non-ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and recent legal challenges like the *Loi Molac*, linguistic communities have forged resilient pathways for survival. These pathways include the creation of successful immersive school networks (e.g., Diwan, Calandretas), the use of cultural production as a space for innovation and prestige-building, and the development of vibrant digital communities. A key finding is the emergence of "new speakers," a demographic recasting the terms of language legitimacy and transforming linguistic practice from an inherited tradition into a conscious act of political and cultural identity. The article suggests that the future of France's linguistic diversity hinges on the Republic's capacity to reconcile its foundational monolingual ideology with the persistent, lived reality of its multilingual populace.

KEYWORDS

Sociolinguistics; language policy; language ideology; regional languages; diglossia

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INTRODUCTION

The French Republic, perhaps more than any other modern nation-state, has constructed its identity upon the foundation of a unified, centralized, and indivisible culture, with language as its primary pillar. Constitutionally enshrined in Article 2, the declaration that

« La langue de la République est le français »
[The language of the Republic is French]

is not merely a legal statement but the culmination of a centuries-long political project. This project has successfully projected an image of France as a model of linguistic homogeneity,

a nation where the language of Paris is synonymous with the language of the people (Oakes, 2001). This perception, however, is a carefully constructed façade that belies a deep and persistent history of profound linguistic diversity. Beneath the surface of official monolingualism, a rich and varied mosaic of *langues régionales* [regional languages] has survived, creating a central paradox that defines the nation's sociolinguistic landscape. This is the paradox of a state that officially recognizes only one language while being, in lived reality, home to a multitude of others, including the Celtic language of Breton; the Germanic dialect of Alsatian; the language isolate of Basque; and the distinct Romance languages of Catalan, Corsican, and the diverse family of Occitan dialects.

A precise linguistic clarification is essential to understanding the terms of this conflict. Within the French context, the designation *langues régionales* is not a casual label but a specific classification. It refers to those idioms spoken in metropolitan France that fall outside the Gallo-Romance linguistic family, which means they are distinct from the dialects of Oïl (northern French), Oc (Occitan), and Franco-Provençal. This category therefore includes fundamentally different linguistic systems: the Germanic languages of *Flemish*, *Alsatian*, and *Mosellan*; the Celtic language of *Breton*; the language isolate of *Basque*; and the distinct Romance languages of *Roussillon Catalan* and *Corsican*. The scholarly and political insistence on calling them 'languages' rather than 'dialects' underscores a fundamental point: none are considered a mere subset or regional variation of French. This distinction is paramount, as the languages at the heart of this study represent autonomous linguistic systems, each with a unique history, grammar, and cultural development entirely separate from that of Standard French.

The relationship between Standard French and these languages is not one of peaceful coexistence but of a deeply asymmetrical power dynamic, born from a history of deliberate suppression (Certeau et al., 1975; Lodge, 1993). The French state, driven by what Ager (1999) compellingly frames as a deep-seated national "insecurity," has historically viewed this internal diversity not as a source of cultural wealth but as a threat to its territorial integrity and republican ideals. This has created a contested space where the state's centralizing, assimilationist project collides with enduring regional identities that are increasingly articulated through the very languages the state sought to eradicate. The result is a complex and often fraught connection between political ideology, restrictive legal constraints, and the powerful resilience of linguistic communities. This enduring tension forms the central problematic of this article.

The historical and ongoing suppression of regional languages in France, coupled with their recent, albeit limited, recognition as cultural "heritage," raises a critical question about the nature of their survival in the 21st century. The legal and social environment is one of inherent contradiction: while the overt punishment of the past has ceased, the institutional framework continues to privilege French in every official domain, from education to public administration. This creates significant barriers to the transmission and revitalization of the *langues régionales*, which are left to rely on the efforts of community activists and associative movements. Therefore, the primary research question that guides this article is: How do Standard French and the *langues régionales* coexist in a political and social framework that

was explicitly designed to promote the former through the eradication of the latter? To answer this, the study analyzes the mechanisms of linguistic dominance—including the subtle but pervasive effects of institutionalized discrimination, or *glottophobie* (Blanchet, 2016)—and the multifaceted strategies of resistance and revitalization that characterize contemporary France.

This article argues that the coexistence of Standard French and France's *langues régionales* is best understood not as a stable state but as a dynamic and continuous tension between a top-down state policy of linguistic assimilation and bottom-up, identity-driven movements for linguistic pluralism. This process is shaped by a fundamental collision between the rigid, monolingual constraints of the republican legal framework and the persistent, adaptive efforts of grassroots sociolinguistic activism. The result is a precarious but resilient linguistic pluralism, structured by a classic diglossic reality where French dominates the high-status public spheres and regional languages are largely confined to private or community-based functions (Gardy & Lafont, 1981). It is argued that while the *langues régionales* remain legally and institutionally subordinate to French, their survival is being actively negotiated. They are being kept alive, and in some cases revitalized, through the creation of alternative educational systems, the vibrancy of cultural production, and the opportunities afforded by new digital platforms. These efforts, which align with the principles of Reversing Language Shift (Fishman, 1991), demonstrate that the continued existence of these languages is not a sign of a stable equilibrium but of an ongoing struggle. This struggle reflects deeper, unresolved debates about the very nature of French national identity, the scope of minority rights within a universalist republic, and the true meaning of cultural heritage in the 21st century (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Wright, 2004).

To explore this contested coexistence in detail, this paper will ground its analysis in a set of fixed case studies and will focus primarily on Breton (a Celtic language in the northwest), Occitan (a Romance language family in the south), and Alsatian (a Germanic dialect in the east). The selection of Breton, Occitan, and Alsatian as the primary case studies for this article is deliberate. These three examples offer a representative cross-section of the diverse linguistic and political situations in France. They belong to three different language families (Celtic, Romance, and Germanic, respectively), each with a unique historical relationship to the central state. Furthermore, they reflect the varying degrees of political confrontation. Regions such as Brittany (along with Corsica and the Basque Country) have histories of strong autonomist or separatist political movements in which the regional language was a central pillar of a distinct national identity that predated its integration into the French state. This often led to more direct and sustained conflict with Paris. In contrast, the situation in Alsace is shaped by its unique history of shifting between French and German rule, creating a complex cross-border identity where the language issue is tied as much to geopolitical history as to internal regionalism. By examining these varied contexts, this article can provide a more nuanced analysis of how different historical paths have shaped the contemporary struggle for linguistic survival.

This the article is structured in a logical progression from the historical foundations to the contemporary realities and prospects. Section 2 will trace the historical construction of

French linguistic hegemony, detailing the key political and ideological moments, from the French Revolution to the establishment of secular mass education, that enshrined monolingualism as a state doctrine. Section 3 will then analyze the contemporary political-legal framework, focusing on the restrictive interpretation of Article 2 of the Constitution, France's persistent non-ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and the recent legal battles surrounding the 2021 *Loi Molac*. Section 4 moves from the abstract to the concrete, examining the primary domains of conflict and coexistence—education, media, cultural production, and the digital realm—through specific sociolinguistic case studies from regions such as Brittany (Breton), Occitania (Occitan), and Alsace (Alsatian). Section 5 will synthesize these findings in a broader discussion, analyzing the evolving nature of diglossia in France and the crucial role of "new speakers" in challenging traditional linguistic norms. Finally, Section 6 will offer a conclusion that summarizes the central arguments of the paper, reflects on the future trajectories of France's regional languages, and suggests avenues for further research in this dynamic field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foundations of French Linguistic Hegemony

The absolute dominance of Standard French within the borders of the modern Republic is not a natural or inevitable sociolinguistic outcome but the result of a deliberate, centuries-long, and often brutal political project aimed at forging a unified nation-state from a diverse collection of peoples (Wright, 2004). This process, which saw one dialect elevated to the status of a national language while all others were systematically suppressed, can be traced through key historical moments that reveal a consistent ideology: the belief that linguistic unity is a prerequisite for political unity. Understanding this history is essential to grasping the deep-rooted nature of the contemporary conflict between the central state and its regional linguistic communities.

The foundations of state intervention in language were laid long before the Revolution. The Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts (1539), decreed by King Francis I, is often cited as the foundational act of French language policy. Its most famous article mandated the use of the "maternal French language" (*langage maternel françois*) in all legal and administrative documents, in place of Latin. While its immediate goal was to make the law more accessible and to wrest power from the clergy, its long-term consequence was far more profound. As Lodge (1993) argues, the Ordinance established the critical principle that the sovereign state had the right and the authority to legislate language use within its domain. Although its primary target was Latin, and it did not actively seek to suppress the various vernaculars spoken by the majority of the population, it set a powerful precedent. In parallel, the dialect of the Île-de-France region, *le francien*, was steadily gaining prestige as the language of the royal court, the administration, and a burgeoning print culture. This process of codification was formalized with the establishment of the Académie Française in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu, tasked with "purifying" the language and establishing a definitive standard of

"correct" usage. These pre-revolutionary developments laid the groundwork for what was to come: they selected a norm, began to codify it, and established the state's role as its ultimate arbiter.

However, it was the French Revolution that transformed this gradual process of standardization into a radical and violent project of linguistic assimilation. The Revolution provided the ideological blueprint that explicitly and forcefully linked a single, unified language with the very concept of the Republic. Initially, some revolutionaries, particularly the Girondins[1], envisioned a federalist republic where linguistic diversity could be tolerated, and early decrees were ordered to be translated into the various languages of the nation, including German, Italian, Basque, and Breton. This pluralistic vision was short-lived. With the rise of the Jacobins[2] and the existential threats of internal rebellion and foreign invasion, linguistic diversity was rapidly reframed as a political crime. Regional languages were pejoratively and collectively dismissed as *patois*.

Here, a terminological distinction is critical. Within the context of Gallo-Romance France (the regions of Oïl, Oc, and Franco-Provençal), the terms *dialecte* [dialect] and *patois* can refer to the same linguistic realities, but their respective connotations are profoundly different. The term *dialecte* is primarily used by linguists; its connotation is scientific, and as a technical term, it carries no pejorative value. In contrast, the term *patois* evokes a functional and social inferiority in relation to the standard language. It is often the only term used in common parlance, notably by the speakers of these varieties themselves, reflecting an internalized sense of linguistic hierarchy. The revolutionaries' choice to exclusively use the word *patois* was therefore a deliberate political act, one that framed regional languages not as neutral linguistic systems but as debased, inferior forms of speech that needed to be corrected or eliminated.

These *patois* were ideologically recast as the instruments of feudalism, superstition, and counter-revolution (Judge, 2007). This was not an abstract fear but a concrete political calculation. Revolutionaries in Paris were convinced that citizens who could not understand decrees written in French were susceptible to the influence of priests and aristocrats, and that populations along the borders speaking Germanic or Italic dialects were vulnerable to foreign propaganda.

This ideology found its most chilling and influential expression in the work of the Abbé Henri Grégoire[3]. His 1794 *Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d'anéantir les patois et d'universaliser l'usage de la langue française* [Report on the necessity and means to annihilate the *patois* and to universalize the use of the French language] was a political manifesto that weaponized language. As meticulously analyzed by Certeau, Julia, and Revel (1975), Grégoire's report was not a neutral linguistic survey but a call to arms. Based on a nationwide questionnaire, he painted a picture of a France where the vast majority of citizens were "linguistic barbarians," incapable of participating in the new enlightened Republic because they did not speak its language. The very title of his report is telling: the goal was not merely to promote French but to "annihilate" (*anéantir*) all other forms of speech. For Grégoire and the Jacobins, the *patois* were not simply different languages; they were obstacles to reason, carriers of prejudice, and bulwarks of a reactionary past that had to be destroyed. Speaking

French was equated with being a rational, modern, and loyal citizen; linguistic diversity was cast as a direct threat to the indivisibility and ideological purity of the Republic. This sentiment was echoed by other revolutionary leaders like Bertrand Barère[4], who famously declared to the Convention[5] on January 28, 1794, "Federalism and superstition speak Breton; emigration and hatred of the Republic speak German... The monarchy had reasons to resemble the Tower of Babel; in a democracy, to leave the citizens ignorant of the national language... is to betray the fatherland."

The logic underpinning this seemingly anti-democratic statement is crucial to understanding the Jacobin worldview. The reference to the "Tower of Babel" was a direct repudiation of the *Ancien Régim*e, which they viewed as a chaotic patchwork of feudal territories kept deliberately separate by different laws, customs, and languages. To them, this fragmentation was a tool of monarchical control that kept the populace divided and ignorant. A true Republic, in contrast, required perfect transparency and direct communication between the state and a unified citizenry. In this view, leaving citizens "ignorant of the national language" was not respecting their freedom, but abandoning them to the manipulative influence of counter-revolutionary priests and aristocrats. Therefore, failing to enforce linguistic unity was seen as a betrayal of the republican project itself, an act that weakened the nation from within and left it vulnerable to its enemies. The individual's freedom to speak *patois* was thus deemed subordinate to the collective duty to build a strong, monolingual, and enlightened nation.

This revolutionary ideology was ruthlessly institutionalized throughout the 19th century, a project powerfully advanced by the Jules Ferry Laws of the 1880s. These laws, establishing free, mandatory, and secular public education [*l'école publique, laïque et obligatoire*], created the most effective instrument for national integration and linguistic suppression ever devised (Oakes, 2001). Paired with other powerful homogenizing forces like centralized military conscription—which mixed soldiers from different regions and forced them to communicate in French—and the expansion of the railway network, the state school became the key site for what Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) would later categorize as "linguistic genocide in education." For generations, schoolchildren were systematically and psychologically abused for speaking their native languages. This policy was enforced through methods of profound humiliation, most famously the practice known as *le symbole* [the symbol]. As described in numerous accounts (e.g., McDonald, 1989), this was an object—a clog, a coin, a piece of slate, or an animal bone—that a teacher would give to a child caught speaking Breton, Occitan, or Alsatian. That child could only be rid of the shameful object by catching a classmate in the same "crime" and passing it on. This created a cruel system of mutual surveillance and betrayal among peers, breaking the solidarity of the linguistic community from within. The child left holding the symbol at the end of the day was punished, often corporally.

The psychological impact of this system cannot be overstated. It was devastatingly effective, not only by severing the chain of intergenerational transmission but also by internalizing a deep sense of linguistic insecurity and self-contempt among speakers. This phenomenon, which Blanchet (2016) has termed *glottophobie*, taught generations that their

native language was not just useless but a shameful marker of inferiority, a handicap to social and economic mobility. As a result, many parents, themselves victims of this system, made the painful decision to stop speaking their own language to their children, believing they were giving them a better chance in life by raising them exclusively in French. They thus became the final, unwilling agents in the state's project of linguistic erasure. By the mid-20th century, the project had largely succeeded. As the landmark survey by Héran, Filhon, and Deprez (2002) would later quantify, the rate of language transmission had plummeted across all regions. French was established as the undisputed high-status (H) language of public life, education, and power, while the *langues régionales* were relegated to the low-status (L) functions of the home and the farm, stigmatized as markers of rurality and backwardness. This cemented the classic diglossic conflict that, despite recent revitalization efforts, continues to structure the sociolinguistic reality of France today (Gardy & Lafont, 1981).

Contemporary Political-Legal Framework: A Contested Heritage

The historical tension between Jacobin centralization and regional diversity, forged in the crucible of the Revolution and institutionalized in the 19th century, continues to define France's contemporary legal landscape. While the overt, punitive suppression of the past has given way to a more subtle policy of reluctant tolerance, the legal framework remains fundamentally shaped by the ideal of linguistic unity. The state's approach reveals a significant and persistent contradiction: it simultaneously acknowledges the *langues régionales* as a form of cultural "heritage" worthy of preservation while systematically denying them the substantive rights and public functions necessary for their survival and transmission (Joubert & Harrison, 2019). This section provides a critical analysis of the key legal instruments and debates that govern the status of regional languages today, revealing a system that enshrines French as the sole language of the Republic, thereby perpetuating a hierarchy that is increasingly at odds with both grassroots aspirations and European norms.

The cornerstone of French monolingualism is Article 2 of the Constitution of the Fifth Republic, which states, « La langue de la République est le français » [The language of the Republic is French]. This clause, added in 1992 not to suppress internal languages but in response to the perceived threat of English in the context of the Maastricht Treaty, has become the ultimate legal barrier to any official recognition or co-official status for regional languages. The *Conseil Constitutionnel* [Constitutional Council], France's highest constitutional authority, has consistently interpreted this article in the most restrictive manner possible. In a series of landmark decisions, it has ruled that Article 2 implies the exclusive use of French in all aspects of public life, including the functioning of the state, the provision of public services, and, most critically, public education. This interpretation creates a constitutional firewall against any policy that would grant substantive rights to regional language speakers, a position that stands in stark contrast to the legal frameworks of many other European nations, such as Spain or the United Kingdom, which have devolved significant linguistic powers to their regions (Judge, 2007).

In 2008, after years of debate, a small concession was made with the addition of Article 75-1, which states that « Les langues régionales appartiennent au patrimoine de la France » [Regional languages belong to the heritage of France]. While celebrated by activists as a long-overdue recognition, the legal and practical impact of this article has been negligible. The choice of the word "patrimoine" [heritage] over "droit" [right] is crucial. As Lagarde (2020) and other legal scholars have pointed out, heritage is something to be preserved and displayed, like an artifact in a museum; it does not confer any enforceable rights upon its speakers. The *Conseil Constitutionnel* has affirmed this interpretation, ruling that Article 75-1 is purely symbolic and cannot be invoked to challenge the primacy of French established in Article 2. This creates a legal paradox where the state acknowledges the value of these languages as part of its history but refuses to provide the legal means for them to have a future. They are, in effect, legally recognized as moribund.

This constitutional rigidity is most evident in France's paradoxical relationship with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe, 1992). This international treaty, designed to protect and promote historical minority languages, has been ratified by most Western European states. France signed the Charter in 1999 under the government of Lionel Jospin, a move that signaled a potential opening toward linguistic pluralism. However, the signature was never followed by ratification. The *Conseil Constitutionnel*, in a 1999 decision, ruled that the Charter's provisions were fundamentally incompatible with the French Constitution. The Council argued that clauses promoting the use of regional languages in public administration, the justice system, and education would violate the principles of the "indivisibility of the Republic," the "equality of all citizens before the law," and the "unicity of the French people." This refusal to ratify is highly symbolic and politically significant. It positions France as an outlier in Western Europe and demonstrates the deep ideological resistance to a multilingual public sphere, a resistance that prioritizes an abstract, homogenous vision of citizenship over the lived linguistic realities of its population (Wright, 2004).

The most recent and vivid illustration of this clash between legislative progress and constitutional barriers has been the saga of the Loi Molac of 2021. Championed by parliamentarian Paul Molac, this law represented the most significant legislative attempt to date to protect and promote regional languages. It was passed by a large majority in the National Assembly, demonstrating a clear political will within the legislative branch to move toward greater linguistic accommodation. The law included several key provisions, but two were particularly vital for revitalization efforts: one authorizing public funding for immersive schools like the Breton Diwan and Occitan Calandretas, and another permitting the use of diacritics from regional languages (such as the tilde in Breton's *Fañch*) in official civil records.

Despite its democratic passage, the law was immediately challenged by a group of deputies and referred to the *Conseil Constitutionnel*. In a decision that sent shockwaves through regional language communities, the Council struck down the two most crucial articles (Gourevitch, 2021; Pierozak, 2021). It ruled that immersive education in a language other than French within the public school system (even by contract) was unconstitutional, as it violated the exclusivity of French mandated by Article 2. It also ruled that the use of

"non-French" diacritics in official documents was an attack on the integrity of the French language. This decision was a major blow to revitalization movements and powerfully reaffirmed the legal supremacy of French. As Coyos (2022) argues, the ruling revealed a critical fracture within the state apparatus: a legislative branch (Parliament) willing to advance linguistic pluralism clashing with a constitutional body acting as the ultimate guardian of a rigid, monolingual orthodoxy. It demonstrated, in the starkest terms, that even when a democratic majority in Parliament supports change, the constitutional framework remains a formidable, and perhaps insurmountable, obstacle to the development of a truly multilingual public life in France. The state, through its highest court, continues to enforce a legal reality that is profoundly disconnected from the nation's rich linguistic heritage.

Domains of Coexistence and Conflict: The Lived Reality of a Linguistic Hierarchy

The abstract legal principles and historical ideologies discussed previously are not confined to constitutional texts or academic debates; they manifest concretely in the daily lives of speakers across France. The dynamic tension between state-led assimilation and grassroots revitalization unfolds across several key domains, which serve as the primary arenas where linguistic hierarchies are reinforced, negotiated, and contested. The domains of education, media, the public sphere, cultural production, and the digital realm are the lived spaces where the functional distribution of languages—the very core of diglossia—becomes most apparent. A critical examination of these domains reveals a consistent and telling pattern: a near-total dominance of French in official, state-controlled spheres, met with a tenacious and innovative resilience in cultural and community-based spaces. It is in these arenas that the true cost of France's monolingual policy, and the profound determination of its linguistic minorities to survive, is most vividly illustrated.

1. Education: The Primary and Enduring Battleground

Since the Jules Ferry Laws of the 19th century, the school has been the central instrument of French linguistic policy, and it remains the most critical and emotionally charged battleground for revitalization movements today. The contemporary educational landscape is not a neutral space for learning but a fractured territory reflecting two opposing philosophies. On one side stands the monolithic, French-language national education system (*Éducation Nationale*), which, despite minor reforms, continues to operate as a powerful engine of assimilation. Within this state system, the space afforded to regional languages is minimal and often precarious. It typically takes the form of optional introductory classes for a few hours a week or, in the best-case scenario, limited bilingual programs based on *parité horaire* [equal time], where subjects are split 50/50 between French and the regional language. While seemingly progressive, this model, as argued by many sociolinguists and activists, is often insufficient to create fully fluent speakers and implicitly

reinforces the idea that the regional language is an "add-on" to a French-language norm (Alen-Garabato & Cellier, 2009).

On the other side of this divide stand the associative, community-run immersive schools, the most potent symbols of linguistic resistance in France. These networks—most famously the Diwan schools in Brittany (founded in 1977), the Calandretas in Occitania (founded in 1979), and the Ikastolak in the French Basque Country—were created by parents and activists in direct response to the state's failure to provide meaningful education in their languages. Operating on the principle of full immersion, where the regional language is the primary medium of instruction from preschool onwards, these schools represent a radical pedagogical and political departure from the state model. Their methodology is grounded in the well-established sociolinguistic principle that immersion is the most effective educational strategy for creating fluent, active bilingual speakers and thus for reversing language shift (Fishman, 1991; Larvol, 2022). Their very existence is a powerful statement: a community's refusal to let its language die.

However, these immersive schools exist in a state of profound legal and financial precarity. Despite their proven pedagogical success and consistently high academic results (often outperforming state schools in national exams, including in French) (Dołowy-Rybińska, 2016), they are not fully integrated into the public system. They operate under a complex contractual status that leaves them perpetually reliant on a patchwork of local subsidies, private donations, and parental fees. This is where the central hypocrisy of the French state's position is laid bare. The *Conseil Constitutionnel*'s 2021 decision to strike down the Loi Molac's provision for securing public funding for immersive education was a devastating reminder of their vulnerability. The ruling, which declared immersive education in a language other than French to be unconstitutional, reinforced the state's unwavering ideological opposition to any educational model that might challenge the absolute primacy of French (Gourevitch, 2021). This creates a deeply inequitable two-tiered system. The state offers a "safe," largely symbolic form of bilingualism that is insufficient to create new generations of speakers, while the most effective method for language transmission is relegated to a semi-private, underfunded, and legally precarious status. The message from the state is clear: you are free to save your language, but you must do it on your own time and with your own money.

2. Media and the Public Sphere: The Struggle for Symbolic Space

The linguistic hierarchy is also starkly visible in the domains of media and the public sphere, where the battle is one for audibility and visibility. The national media landscape—television, radio, and print—operates as a powerful monolingual echo chamber, reinforcing the status of French as the sole language of important public discourse. Regional languages are largely confined to niche programming on the regional branches of the state broadcaster France 3, often relegated to off-peak hours, or on small, community-run radio stations. While these outlets are vital lifelines for maintaining a media presence and providing a platform for speakers, their limited reach and resources mean they cannot compete with the

cultural and symbolic power of the French-language media juggernaut. This disparity in media representation perpetuates the diglossic model, where French is the language of news, politics, and national culture, while regional languages are framed as the languages of local folklore and nostalgia.

The struggle for visibility is most physically and politically apparent in the linguistic landscape—the language of public signs, advertising, and place names. As Amos (2017) has shown in a study of Toulouse, the linguistic landscape is not a neutral reflection of the local linguistic reality but a highly regulated space that reproduces the dominant language ideology. In regions like Brittany, Corsica, and the Basque Country, bilingual road signs have become a key symbol of revitalization efforts, hard-won victories for activists who have campaigned for decades. They represent a powerful claim to public space and a direct challenge to the monolingual norm.

However, this visibility is often contested, transforming the landscape into an active front in the struggle for legitimacy. The frequent, deliberate defacement of the French-language portion of bilingual signs—often with spray paint—is a poignant illustration of this ongoing conflict. What the state may view as an act of vandalism is, for many activists, a political act of "guerilla semiotics," a reappropriation of territory. It is a visceral rejection of a hierarchy that often places French first and in a larger font. For revitalization movements, these signs are a declaration that the regional language is not a historical footnote but a living language that belongs in the public sphere. For the state, they are a carefully managed concession to local "heritage," a gesture that stops short of granting any official status. This constant tension makes the linguistic landscape of France a visible barometer of the unresolved and deeply contested status of its regional languages.

3. Cultural Production and the Arts: The Breathing Space for Innovation

While constrained in the official domains of education and administration, regional languages often flourish in the arts. Cultural production—music, literature, theatre, and festivals—provides a vital breathing space for linguistic expression, innovation, and prestige-building, often operating with a degree of freedom unimaginable in the state-controlled spheres. This domain is crucial for revitalization because it directly counters the state-sponsored narrative of regional languages as archaic relics of a peasant past. Instead, it presents them as living, dynamic, and thoroughly modern tools for creativity (Joubert & Harrison, 2019).

In Brittany, the *Fest-Noz* [night festival], a vibrant gathering of traditional dance and music, was recognized by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is a powerful example of a cultural event that normalizes the use of Breton in a contemporary and celebratory social setting, attracting thousands of young participants. In the musical realm, artists have been particularly effective at bridging the gap between tradition and modernity. The iconic Corsican polyphonic singing groups, such as A Filetta, have gained international acclaim, while artists from the Occitan-speaking regions, like the band Massilia Sound System, have for decades successfully blended traditional linguistic

forms with modern genres like reggae and hip-hop (Blackwood, 2008). Their music, often carrying a strong political message of regional identity, has attracted younger audiences who might otherwise have little contact with the language. This cultural production is a form of language planning from below. It builds prestige, creates new domains of use, and, most importantly, builds a sense of pride and emotional connection to the language, providing a powerful antidote to the historical shame and linguistic insecurity imposed by the state.

4. The Digital Realm: New Frontiers of Self-Determination

The rise of the internet and social media has created unprecedented opportunities for regional language speakers, opening up a new and profoundly disruptive frontier in the struggle for survival. Digital platforms offer a decentralized space where speakers can bypass the centralized, French-language traditional media and create, share, and consume content in their own languages on a global scale. This has led to an explosion of bottom-up revitalization initiatives that are largely beyond the control of the central state.

Online collaborative dictionaries, language-learning apps like *Breton M(A)L* for Breton, YouTube channels dedicated to Alsatian cooking, and countless social media groups nurture a sense of community among speakers who may be geographically dispersed (Kremnitz & Broudic, 2024). This digital sphere allows for the creation of a virtual linguistic landscape where the regional language can be the norm rather than the exception. It is a particularly crucial domain for the "new speakers" emerging from immersive schools, providing them with the resources, peer networks, and authentic language exposure necessary to continue their learning journey outside the classroom. Young activists are now using platforms like TikTok and Twitch to stream video games in Occitan or share short, humorous videos in Basque, creating a new, modern, and "cool" image for languages long stigmatized as outdated. While the digital realm does not solve the fundamental problems of legal status or educational funding, it represents a monumental shift in the power dynamics of language use. It empowers communities to engage in their own form of language planning, to create their own media, and to build their own transnational networks of solidarity, demonstrating a form of linguistic self-determination that was unimaginable just a few decades ago.

DISCUSSION

Evolving Diglossia, Identity Politics, and the Rise of New Speakers

The relationship between Standard French and the *langues régionales* has long been framed through the classic sociolinguistic lens of diglossia. As originally conceptualized by Ferguson (1959) and later applied to the Occitan context by Gardy and Lafont (1981), this model describes a relatively stable situation where two varieties of a language (or two distinct languages) are used by a single speech community in functionally separate domains. One is the 'High' (H) variety, associated with power, prestige, education, and official public life,

while the other is the 'Low' (L) variety, used for informal, private functions like home, family, and community. For centuries, this model has accurately depicted the French situation: French has unequivocally been the H language, while the *langues régionales* have been relegated to L functions. However, the contemporary situation, fueled by decades of grassroots activism and profound shifts in identity politics, is far more fluid, dynamic, and contested than a stable diglossic model might suggest. Revitalization efforts are actively pushing regional languages into new domains, deliberately challenging their confinement to the L-sphere and, in doing so, creating new social tensions, new linguistic forms, and a new type of speaker.

A central driver of this change, and perhaps the most significant sociolinguistic phenomenon in contemporary France, is the emergence of "new speakers" (*nouveaux locuteurs*). The concept of the 'new speaker,' as defined and explored by O'Rourke, Pujolar, and Ramallo (2015), provides a crucial analytical lens for understanding this shift. The term refers to individuals who acquire an endangered or minority language outside the traditional context of direct intergenerational transmission. They are not "native" speakers in the conventional sense. Instead, they learn the language through formal education, as adult learners, or through community-based initiatives. In France, the graduates of the Diwan, Calandreta, and Ikastola immersive schools are the most prominent and numerous examples of this new linguistic demographic.

These new speakers are sociolinguistically distinct from "traditional" speakers in several crucial ways. They are often urban, highly educated, and come from French-speaking family backgrounds. Their motivations for learning the language are frequently ideological, rooted in a conscious desire to reclaim a cultural or political identity that they feel has been denied to them by the centralizing state (Sauvage, 2020). Furthermore, the language they acquire is often a standardized, codified form—such as the "néo-breton" taught in Diwan schools—which has been deliberately developed for pedagogical purposes and is often distinct from the diverse, localized vernacular dialects spoken by the remaining traditional speakers.

The rise of new speakers has profound and complex implications for the future of these languages. On one hand, they are the undisputed demographic and ideological engine of revitalization. They bring new life, energy, and prestige to languages long associated with decline. They are creating new domains of use for the language, particularly in professional urban settings, modern cultural production, and, most significantly, the digital realm. They are the teachers in the immersive schools, the bloggers, the podcasters, and the musicians who are ensuring that the language has a modern, public voice. In many ways, they represent the most tangible success of the revitalization movements and the only viable hope for reversing language shift in a context where traditional transmission has all but ceased (Fishman, 1991).

On the other hand, their presence can create significant internal tensions within the linguistic communities themselves. The very concept of a "new speaker" challenges traditional notions of authenticity and legitimacy. As Costa (2015) has explored in the context of Provence, debates over who has the "right" to speak the language, and which

form of the language is "correct," can become a source of conflict. Some traditional speakers, whose identity is rooted in a lifetime of speaking a local dialect, may view the standardized, school-taught varieties as artificial, overly politicized, and disconnected from the "authentic" vernacular. This can lead to a painful internal fracture within the revitalization movement, a struggle between the perceived legitimacy of the "last native speakers" and the ideological conviction of the "new speakers" who are carrying the language forward. This highlights a critical and delicate challenge for revitalization movements worldwide: how to bridge the gap between reclaiming a language as a powerful symbol of identity and maintaining its continuity as a lived, organic, and diverse community-based practice.

This dynamic is intrinsically linked to a broader shift in identity politics and the very meaning of linguistic choice in France. For older generations, speaking a regional language was often an inherited, un-theorized part of daily life, albeit one that became increasingly associated with shame and social disadvantage due to the state's policies of *glottophobie* (Blanchet, 2016). For new speakers, and for many younger traditional speakers who have been influenced by the revitalization movements, the choice to speak Breton, Occitan, or Basque is a conscious, deliberate, and often political act. It is, as Vassberg (1993) termed it in her study of Alsatian, an "act of identity." It is a public performance of a regional affiliation in defiance of the centralizing, monolingual state. This shift from an inherited, often hidden practice to a chosen, proudly displayed identity is a hallmark of language revitalization in the 21st century. It transforms the sociolinguistic landscape from one of simple, passive language shift to one of active, political contestation and reclamation (McDonald, 1989).

To fully appreciate the uniqueness of the French situation, a brief comparative perspective is illuminating. While many European nations have complex relationships with their linguistic minorities, the French model of reluctant, symbolic accommodation is increasingly an outlier. In Spain, the 1978 Constitution recognized the co-official status of languages like Catalan, Basque, and Galician in their respective autonomous communities. This has allowed for the development of robust, publicly funded immersive education systems (such as in Catalonia), a strong media presence, and the use of these languages in public administration—the very rights denied in France. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the Welsh Language Act (1993) and subsequent legislation have given Welsh official status in Wales, mandating its use in the public sector and ensuring its central role in the education system. While these models are not without their own challenges and complexities, they represent a fundamental political acceptance of linguistic pluralism within the state that is absent in France. The French state's refusal to ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, a step taken by both Spain and the UK, is the clearest symbol of this ideological divergence. The French republican model, with its insistence on an abstract, universalist citizenship that can only be expressed through a single language, remains deeply resistant to a vision of the nation as a "community of communities." This comparison starkly highlights the fact that the primary obstacle to the flourishing of regional languages in France is not a lack of resources or public interest, but a deeply entrenched and constitutionally protected political ideology.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that the coexistence of Standard French and France's *langues régionales* is not a stable partnership but a dynamic and deeply asymmetrical struggle. It is a relationship defined by the enduring ideological rigidity of the republican state on one hand, and the remarkable resilience of regional linguistic communities on the other. The historical project to "annihilate the *patois*," born from the universalist ambitions of the French Revolution, has evolved into a modern legal framework that consigns regional languages to the paradoxical status of a tolerated, yet subordinate, cultural heritage. This framework, anchored by a restrictive interpretation of the Constitution, creates a reality where these languages are celebrated as artifacts of a bygone France while being denied the very tools—in education, media, and public life—necessary to secure their future. Despite this, revitalization movements, driven by a profound commitment to cultural survival, have carved out crucial spaces for existence and innovation. In the classrooms of immersive schools, in the vibrant notes of contemporary regional music, and across the boundless territories of the digital realm, a new generation of speakers is actively refusing to let their linguistic identity be relegated to a museum.

The future of France's regional languages is therefore poised at a critical and uncertain juncture. They face the undeniable existential threats of demographic decline and a constitutional framework that remains fundamentally hostile to substantive pluralism. Yet, they are not moribund. The narrative of inevitable extinction is being actively challenged by a modest but significant renaissance, one fueled by passionate activists, dedicated educators, and the powerful sense of identity being reclaimed by "new speakers." Their survival now hinges on the ability of these communities to translate the symbolic gains and cultural vibrancy of recent decades into tangible, legally recognized rights and functions. The path forward is not a return to a monolingual past, but a continued, arduous negotiation of what it means to be French in a nation that is, in reality, profoundly and beautifully multilingual.

Ultimately, the central challenge is not for the linguistic minorities, but for the French Republic itself. The question is whether it can finally move beyond its foundational, two-century-old monolingual ideology to embrace a more inclusive and accurate model of citizenship—one that recognizes linguistic diversity not as a threat to unity, but as an integral and enriching component of its national identity. To fail to do so is to risk not the indivisibility of the Republic, but its cultural vitality, impoverishing the very heritage it claims to protect.

For future research, several avenues are critical to understanding this evolving landscape. First, longitudinal studies are urgently needed to track the long-term linguistic, social, and professional outcomes of graduates from immersive schools like Diwan and Calandreta, in order to definitively measure their impact on language transmission and community vitality. Second, further investigation into the digital sphere is required to understand how virtual communities are shaping new language norms, practices, and identities, particularly among younger speakers. Finally, a deeper sociolinguistic analysis of the tensions and synergies between "new" and "traditional" speakers is essential for

navigating the complex internal dynamics of language revitalization and for ensuring that the future of these languages is built on a foundation of both innovation and continuity.

NOTES

1 The Girondins were a moderate republican faction during the French Revolution who advocated for a federalist system with greater regional autonomy. Their political philosophy was more accommodating of provincial differences, which explains their initial tolerance for linguistic diversity, in stark contrast to the centralizing Jacobins.

2 The Jacobins were the most radical and influential political club during the French Revolution (1789-1799). Led by figures like Maximilien Robespierre, they advocated for a highly centralized, indivisible Republic. They viewed any form of regionalism or federalism as a counter-revolutionary threat. Consequently, they saw regional languages (*patois*) as dangerous tools of royalist and clerical resistance that prevented the populace from fully embracing the universal ideals of the Republic, which they believed could only be transmitted through the French language.

3 The Abbé Henri Grégoire (1750-1831) was a Catholic priest and prominent revolutionary politician. As a member of the Committee of Public Instruction, he was tasked with assessing the linguistic situation in France. He argued for the complete eradication of regional languages and their replacement by French as an essential step to create a unified and loyal citizenry, cementing the ideological link between the French language and the Republic.

4 Bertrand Barère de Vieuzac (1755–1841) was a prominent and influential politician during the French Revolution. A skilled orator, he was a key member of the powerful Committee of Public Safety alongside figures like Robespierre. While he initially held moderate views, he became a vocal proponent of the Reign of Terror. His 1794 speech to the National Convention is famous for explicitly linking linguistic diversity with political treason.

5 The National Convention (1792-1794) was the constituent assembly of the Kingdom of France for one day and of the French First Republic for its first three years during the French Revolution.

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