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James Costa, Patricia Lambert

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# France and Language(s): Old Policies and New Challenges in Education. Towards a Renewed Framework?

James Costa, ICAR (CNRS, INRP & University of Lyon): [james.costa@ens-lsh.fr](mailto:james.costa@ens-lsh.fr)

Patricia Lambert, ICAR (CNRS, INRP & University of Lyon): [patricia.lambert@ens-lsh.fr](mailto:patricia.lambert@ens-lsh.fr)

## Abstract

*This article is concerned with the way the French education system deals with new challenges in terms of language, while referring to the (traditional) general framework of language planning in the country. The same principles and mindset that governed the way regional minority languages were treated in the past are now largely determining the way the languages of immigrants and their speakers are treated and considered.*

*We thus seek to remind readers how the theoretical and practical background to language planning in education functions in France, showing how historical factors led to considering linguistic diversity as an unnecessary heritage rather than as an asset. We then move on to examine the state of language teaching generally speaking in the education system, in order to provide a general outlook on the subject.*

*Finally, we show that albeit seemingly monolithic at first, the French system can also accommodate diversity to a certain extent, through looking at two particular contexts.*

## 1. Introduction

The traditional view of France, in terms of language, is that of a monolingual country. In fact, very few people outside France know that over 70 languages are currently listed as *Languages of France* (Cerquiglini, 1999). Yet, none of them are in any way recognised as official in any part of the French territory. Education was long seen as one of the main instruments to implement the desired monolingualism (Martel, 2007a) in a country where French only became a language spoken by the entire population by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet, no ideology, however potent and ancient, is monolithic. The official language policy in France has undergone considerable change over the past few years, and this has had repercussions in terms of language education policies, the focus of this article.

The situation is in fact largely one of tension, or stress, between conflicting aspects and demands from different segments of the French population regarding language. While the dominant and official – yet in many ways unspoken – dogma might still be one asserting the superiority of the French language and the necessity to disregard minority languages, whether

indigenous or immigrant languages, plurilingualism is officially valued in the education system, in a recontextualisation of the Council of Europe's discourse, and all pupils are required to study at least two foreign languages. The French position remains equally ambiguous regarding the status and position of English in France and in the education system.

This article will thus seek to situate the debate around language education policies in its historical context, and to make more explicit the tensions we referred to above, by identifying the most salient ones, but also by showing that the system itself is not as monolithic as could be thought from the outside. Two examples will be analysed for this purpose, one institutionally supported, the other one on the margins of the Institution.

In this article, the terms regional minority language, regional language, minority language are used interchangeably.

## 2. France, language, and language policy

Shohamy has recently defined language policy as “a manipulative tool in the continuous battle between different ideologies” (2006, p. 46). She adds that

*“these manipulations occur on a number of levels and in a number of directions but especially in relation to the legitimacy of using and learning certain language(s) [...] in given contexts and societies [...]”* (p. 46).

Her use of the concept of ideology is of particular relevance here, since France was defined in ideological terms long before it came to be defined in terms of practice. Erasure, one of the mechanisms in ideology formation identified by Gal & Irvine (1995) is of particular importance in France: for the French nation to come into existence, a large part of its history and diversity was to be reinterpreted and redefined as non-important or even non existing.

According to Shohamy (2006, p. 76),

*“language education policy (LEP) refers to a mechanism used to create de facto language practices in educational institutions, especially in centralized educational systems. LEP is considered a form of imposition and manipulation of language policy as it is used by those in authority to turn ideology into practice through formal education”.*

These definitions enable us to define our area of investigation for this article. They point to the fact that dealing with language policies is not an innocent exercise: such an object of investigation deals with the founding ideological principles of nation-states.

The questioning of language policies for research purposes must lead to the questioning of national ideologies, i.e. the very beliefs at the core of national policies. Among the many aspects of *ideology*, we suggest the following formulation as a basis for our presentation here:

*“On the one hand, ideology is no mere set of abstract doctrines but the stuff which makes us uniquely what we are, constitutive of our very identities; on the other hand, , it presents itself as an ‘Everybody knows that’, a kind of anonymous universal truth”* (Eagleton, 1991, p. 20).

We ought, of course, to be wary of universal truths, especially when questioning them. Universal truths such as “French is the language of France”, or “French people are bad at languages”, or even “the system cannot be changed, this is the way it is” inevitably point to ideological attitudes. Those views are both influenced by national language policies and influences on those same policies. They can be found in the discourse of media, in textbooks, on the street or, obviously, in schools. Other similar views can be found in official texts and

documents. Language policies thus have an official, explicit, aspect, as well as an implicit, unofficial one. We will try to briefly develop an analysis of both those aspects.

## 2.1 Official policy: a historical approach

The Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts (1539) is usually believed to mark the beginning of the making of French as an official language for administrative purposes throughout the kingdom of France (Balibar, 1985), although there is some debate around the question.

This Ordinance is still referred to, even today, in the media or by politicians who wish to oppose any pro-regional language policy.

Yet it is not believed to have altered significantly the daily life of the inhabitants of the kingdom: clerks had already begun to use some French in their official documents, even in the Occitan-speaking lands of the South, where Occitan retained prestige for some time (Judge, 2007). The populations continued speaking their local vernaculars.

The situation was to be altered dramatically at the time of the French Revolution beginning in 1789. If, at first, the new established powers sought to use local languages to communicate with the population (Martel, 1988), after the Terror in 1793, this was ended and French was to be made the sole official language in France. In 1790, Grégoire's survey had shown that only three million people, out of a total population of fifteen million, could speak French fluently. Grégoire's survey was conducted in order to justify the elimination of the various vernaculars in competition with the central norm, which was to become the only legitimate variety of speech in what was to become the French Republic. In 1794, Barère is famous for having stated, in a report to the revolutionary Comité de Salut Public:

*“The voice of federalism and of superstition speaks Breton; the émigrés and those who hate the Republic speak German. The counter-revolution speaks Italian; fanaticism speaks Basque. Let us smash these instruments of damage and error... For our part we owe it to our citizens, we owe it to our republic, in order to strengthen it, that everyone on its territory is made to speak the language of the Declaration of the Rights of Man”* (quoted in Judge, 2007, p. 22).

A law was subsequently passed on 20 July 1794 prohibiting the use of any other language but French for official use and official documents (Encrevé, 2002).

Yet, those measures still did not really affect the population in its daily life. Indeed, in 1835, an 1835 study (quoted in Weber, 1977) shows that only a handful of *départements* (the new revolutionary administrative unit) were fully French-speaking (although it is not exactly clear what was meant then by this), all located around Paris and North-western France. In 1863, a survey conducted by Duruy, the Minister for Instruction in Napoleon III's government, and analysed in Weber (1977, pp. 498-501) shows that out of 30 million inhabitants, about 7.5 million were monolingual in a local vernacular. Those were to be found mostly in Brittany, Corsica, Occitan-speaking areas, the Basque Country, Catalonia and Alsace.

The 1870 defeat against Prussia, the advent of the Third Republic, and compulsory schooling were to accelerate the spread of French. The Great War gave regional languages a final blow, and by 1920 most parents would be speaking French, or a regional form of French, to their children. Today, regional language transmission in the homes is a very rare phenomenon, although it seems to have persisted longer in Corsica, Alsace, the Basque Country and some parts of Brittany and Bearn, in South-West France.

It must be noted that bilingualism was never considered a serious option, and French was iconically connected with France and Frenchness as from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Michelet's monumental work on the history of France (Encrevé, 2002). The Alsatian case is slightly different, due to the fact that the Province, where a Germanic dialect is spoken, was part of Germany between 1870 and 1918, and then again between 1940 and 1945 (cf. Tabouret-Keller and Luckel, 1981). In today's overseas territories, the situation is also radically different and many languages are still spoken on a daily basis in French Polynesia, French Guyana, the West-Indies and Reunion Island (cf. Cerquiglini, 2003).

## **2.2 Language in education policy**

In terms of education policy, things were clear from the very beginning. At the time of the Revolution a schoolmaster was to be appointed in every village to teach the French language, but this was in fact never enacted. If it was generally understood that education was to be given in French, masters are known to have used the local vernaculars in various locations and on many occasions (Martel, 2007b). Yet, in 1870, Gaidoz, Charencey and de Gaulle (the General's great uncle) sent a petition in favour of the acceptance of local idioms in schools to the National Assembly. The arguments used then are still used today: bilingualism was presented as an intellectual asset, citizens were thought to deserve equal respect disregarding what language they spoke, and local languages were presented as bridges towards related languages across national borders.

The 1870 French defeat made it impossible for the petition to even be considered. Times had changed, and revenge on Germany was to become a priority. It was then out of question to promote languages which could be used to communicate with neighbours which could all be seen as potential enemies. Local languages could only be seen as a threat, which in fact comforted the arguments given at the time of the Revolution. Even today, pro-French language discourses frame regional languages as an inside enemy in the struggle against English.

When the famous 1882 Jules Ferry school laws were passed, no mention whatsoever was made of languages other than French. The question was obviously not on the cards, and languages other than French were seen as non-existent. In fact, Colonisation rendered the question obsolete, and politicians had their minds now set upon other questions in terms of language.

Several debates took place in Parliament around the question of regional languages and education (Martel, 2005), to no avail, until 1925 when the minister in charge of education, A. de Monzie, ordered that only French be used in all schools. Monolingualism – and monolingualism in the legitimate norm – was seen as the only acceptable choice.

It was not until 1951 that a bill was passed in Parliament authorising Occitan, Breton, Catalan and Basque to be taught in schools as an optional subject outside normal school hours by voluntary teachers (Martel, 2007b).

The situation has moved on, and regional languages can now officially be taught as part of the curriculum, and some bilingual primary schools exist in parts of the country, as we will see later in this article. Regional languages can no longer be considered a threat to the supremacy of French, although it can be argued that they never were. In fact, they were used instrumentally to promote a certain vision of France as a homogeneous country. In France,

“the search for self-identification led to a reification of France itself as a natural and indivisible entity” (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998b, p. 197).

### **1.1 Non official discourses**

The effects of the dominant – monolingual and centralist – ideology is reflected in the dominant medias to this day, and in the dominant public discourse. It is common in the discourse of teachers (Lambert, 2005), and it is also to be found in schoolbooks.

In a study conducted in 2009, we analysed several history and geography books designed for teaching those subject at secondary school level (4<sup>e</sup> classes, pupils between 13-14 years old), as well as the official programmes to which they referred, and we found that despite a general discourses in favour of individual plurilingualism, societal multilingualism was neither perceived nor presented as a desirable option.

Language diversity is still presented as a potential source of problems and violence and is constantly presented alongside the religious question in Europe, thus contributing even more to the association of diversity with tension.

Present day manuals still illustrate what Blommaert & Verschueren (1998a, 1998b) call the dogma of homogeneity, i.e.:

*A view of society in which differences are seen as dangerous and centrifugal and in which the ‘best’ society is suggested to be one without intergroup differences. In other words, the ideal model of society is monolingual, monoethnic, monoreligious, monoideological* (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998b, p. 195).

Schoolbooks, as well as the official syllabus, are still very much marked by the dominant ideologies which they tend to reproduce, despite claims to the contrary. In fact, the situation seems to have changed very little since the 1980s (Martel, 1983).

Regional languages of France are now recognised in the Constitution as a part of the national heritage, which incidentally does not grant their speakers any specific right to use their language in public. Regional languages are by now almost totally gone as means of everyday communication (Héran, et al., 2002), recognising them symbolically is thus, in practical terms, of limited importance.

## **3. Languages in the current education system**

So far, we have discussed France and *language*. The general attitude to *language* in France does of course determine, to a certain extent, the way in which *languages* are perceived and conceived of. Many other elements would nevertheless need to be taken into account and the way in which *languages* are treated in the education system responds to conflicting logics. There is indeed a tension between the imagining of France as a monolingual nation and the necessity to teach foreign languages on the one hand, and the necessity to take immigration languages on the other, particularly in the context of a reframing of the dominant discourse on the French language itself, which now tends to value linguistic diversity as a desirable, yet abstract, state of affairs. Romance languages, English, regional minority languages, “rare languages”, as the system calls languages such as Russian, Chinese, Arabic or even Portuguese, are all seen in different ways according to what stakes they convey and to what

ideological positions they refer to. English is both the arch-enemy, and also a most desirable language to possess in one's linguistic repertoire. The former Minister for Education even declared in September 2008 that he wanted every pupil to become bilingual in English. The ideologies surrounding languages are clearly becoming more and more complex, and vary according to the situation in which they are expressed and the people who voice them.

School is obviously one of the most potent instruments of language policy, and has been used to redefine legitimacy and authority in terms of language, and to reframe identity in a way that suited the Central government (Jaffe, 1999, 2001). Education thus continues to be the principle medium to reproduce the dominant ideologies, yet at the same time it is a site where contradictory discourses and tensions are to be found.

### 3.1 Assets

As can be read in the 2008 Eurydice Network report,

*“Since the beginning of the 2007/08 school year, it has in principle become compulsory for all pupils aged 7 to learn a foreign language. At 14, only the pupils who have taken the option “decouverte professionnelle” (initiation to professional life) (6 hours per week), no longer learn two foreign languages as compulsory subject”* (Eurydice Network, 2008, p. 30).

Languages are thus at the very core of the French education system, it can be said, and the Common Base for Knowledge and Skills requires that a foreign language must be mastered by all pupils at the end of compulsory education (cf. Coquidé, et al., 2008). It must be added that there are a host of optional languages which can also be studied, in addition to the compulsory ones: classical languages such as Latin and Greek, regional minority languages (Basque, Breton, Catalan, Corsican, Creole languages, Tahitian, Occitan – in all its regional varieties –, as well as German in Alsace and Flemish in the areas of Northern France where it is traditionally spoken).

Yet, it must be said that in fact the vast majority of pupils study English as a first language, and all must study English at some stage during their compulsory school years. This is both a result of the existence of a utilitarian ideology which views languages primarily as assets in terms of economic success, as well as of the education policy in France which has tended to promote a small number of languages, namely English, German and Spanish. For various reasons, German is declining steadily, except in Alsace, and Spanish seems to be mainly chosen as a second language. In fact, most parents and pupils demand English as the first foreign language, and this trend is more and more obvious.

As far as regional languages are concerned, over 400,000 pupils follow some form of teaching in or of a regional language (cf. Costa, 2008). While this might seem an important figure, it covers a wide range of situations, which might include bilingual classes as well as classes where a song might occasionally be learnt in a regional language. Also, conditions are still far from ideal, and many teachers in secondary education must still teach during lunch hours, as the system is clearly not designed to accommodate such a wide variety of situations.

A plan is currently being implemented to promote German in the education system, which includes an offer in terms of German language in schools in all *Académies* (the educational administrative divisions in France), and an increase of 20% within five years of the total number of pupils studying German at primary school level. The language should also be offered in secondary education in all locations where it can be studied in primary schools, and

it will be increasingly possible to study both German and English in the first year of secondary education<sup>1</sup>.

The whole education system is undergoing change as regards language. A *Plan de Rénovation des Langues* was set up in 2005 in order to develop skills in foreign languages and to introduce the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages into the system. This is still taking place as we write, and major changes are being implemented in the way foreign languages are taught in schools.

### 3.2 Tensions

As has by now become apparent, a large number of languages are present in the French education system, illustrating a wide panel of sociolinguistic situations. While English is the dominant foreign language throughout the system and throughout most of the territory, regional languages are still present, although clearly not a priority. For political reasons, German is promoted at all levels and Spanish has a well-established niche as a second foreign language for most pupils (Eurydice Network, 2008).

So far both foreign languages as well as regional minority languages have been mentioned. One (highly heterogeneous) group of languages has been strikingly absent, i.e. languages spoken by immigrants and their descendents. Over 400 languages are spoken in France, as was found in a 1999 survey (Héran, et al., 2002), and among them, Arabic, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian as well as some Bantu languages and other Asian and African languages are being transmitted to the younger generations. They are conspicuously absent from the education system. It is a fact that Arabic is offered as a foreign language in some secondary schools, but in forms most often quite dissimilar to the ones found in the pupils' repertoires (Billiez, et al., 2003). Similarly, some immigrant language classes are offered in areas where a demand exists, as part of an ELCO<sup>2</sup> programme. Such programmes have led to a series of difficulties and have raised many issues (Billiez and Trimaille, 2001).

As Billiez, et al. point out (2003, p. 301), it is only recently that sociolinguists have begun to study the way plurilectal repertoires were valued and used in educational settings in France: what type of language classes could be implemented? In what type of curriculum? What would be the effects of such measures on the children themselves?

A large amount of research is still needed in this field, especially as competing discourses advocating an all-French approach are still dominant in the media as well as among teachers. In fact, the education system still functions with two basic assumptions:

*“the integration assumption – that is, the assumption that multilingualism is an obstacle for societal and national integration into a coherent nation-state. [...] The second assumption could be called the efficiency assumption – that is, the assumption that efficient government, as well as economic growth and development, are hampered by multilingualism”* (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998b, p. 206).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://eduscol.education.fr/D0156/all-plan-langue.htm?rub=101>

<sup>2</sup> Enseignement de Langue et de Culture d'Origine, or Teaching of Language and Culture of Origin. Those programmes are set up between France and the countries of origin of pupils.



There is therefore a deep rooted tension between a system which is opening up to European multilingualism, on paper at least, and the plurilingual reality of the country, in conjunction with an underlying assumption which still furthers integration as assimilation.

## **4. Challenges: towards a renewed system?**

The French education system, like all systems, is however not monolithic, far from it. Many changes have occurred in the past few years as regards language and languages, and despite the fact that old ideological reflexes are still dominant, a large amount of variation does exist, and the dominant model is also being challenged, both from within and as a result of greater European integration.

As Shohamy put it,

*“Yet, at times, LEP [Language Education Policy] is also used as a bottom-up, grassroots mechanism to negotiate, demand and introduce alternative language policies”* (2006, p. 76).

We shall now examine two examples of such attempts to establish alternative language policies.

### **4.1 Bilingual education**

Although by bilingual education we mean a system which integrates two languages as both object and medium of education, which would include, in France, several types of experimentations (such as European and International Sections, where one academic subject is partially taught in a foreign language), we will concentrate here on a form of bilingualism which gives both languages equal representation in terms of time. This system is only available for some regional languages, namely Breton, Occitan, Corsican, Basque, Catalan as well as German, considered a regional language in Alsace.

As a result of parents' pressure in the 1970s, and, with the opening of private immersion schools in Brittany, the Basque Country, Northern Catalonia, Languedoc and Aquitaine, the state took action and created its own bilingual primary system, where children are educated in French and in a regional minority language for equal numbers of hours.

The system welcomes an ever-increasing number of pupils: in 2008-2009<sup>3</sup>, there were over 57,000 pupils involved in bilingual education in France at primary level, 70% of which in the public system, 15% in religious private schools and an equal number in private non-profit immersion schools run by parents.

Although systems vary, there is a tendency, in the public sector, to opt for an organisation whereby the same teacher teaches in both French and the minority language, thus enabling cross-subject work in both languages, as well as a more global approach of language as a phenomenon (Cortier, 2008).

In terms of the organisation of the system itself at the level of schools, while Corsica has adopted all-bilingual schools, on the Continent there tends to be one bilingual section among otherwise monolingual schools, which is not without begging questions as to the finality of

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.flarep.com/>

bilingualism. The chosen approach does not focus on language revitalisation but on the children's cognitive development, although both can be compatible.

Such an organisation in terms of language repertoires fits with Candelier's definition of pluralistic approaches:

*“While “singular” approaches address one particular language or culture taken in isolation, pluralistic approaches are teaching approaches in which the learner works on several languages or cultures simultaneously”* (Candelier, 2008, p. 225).

In a way, bilingual education thus constitutes a more and more institutionalised integration of pluralistic approaches. Yet, the system is only really operational for primary education. Bilingual sections do exist in secondary schools in the Occitan-speaking regions, in Brittany, Corsica and elsewhere, but they usually consist in a greater number of hours in the regional language and the teaching of one academic discipline, usually history-geography, through the medium of the minority language.

Bilingual education needs to be analysed “as a component of a wider social economic cultural and political framework” (Hélot, 2003). It is yet unknown what consequences the development of this system could bear on language policy in the education system as a whole.

## 4.2 Pluralistic approaches

We gave the definition of pluralistic approaches in the former section, and bilingual education as a potential illustration in some cases where languages are thought together, and not as discrete entities.

Other approaches include

*the integrated teaching and learning of languages taught (building for instance on the learner's own language to facilitate access to a first foreign language, or on a first foreign language to facilitate access to a second one [...]), the intercomprehension between related languages [...], and, of course, the inter- (or cross-) cultural approach [...]* (Candelier, 2008, p. 225),

and, most saliently, language awareness programmes. Those approaches, even though they might be part of some teacher's everyday class experience, are by no means institutionalised as such. They nevertheless aim at transcending the problems caused by a dichotomous approach in terms of monolingualism vs. bilingualism, and more generally they seek to explore new ways of teaching and approaching languages as well as *language* as a phenomenon.

In 2007, the European Centre for Modern Languages accepted an international project as part of its 2008-2011 programme (“empowering language professionals”) which aimed to combine intercomprehension approaches and language awareness activities to integrate regional minority languages and other languages present in the children's environments. The project, named EBP-ICI<sup>4</sup>, and to which the authors of this article participate, seeks to identify various interlinguistic strategies which guide intercomprehension processes, at primary and secondary school level. Thus, working with teachers of Occitan in Provence and with partners in the Val d'Aoste, Catalonia and Scotland, we have developed partnerships between schools in which

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<sup>4</sup> Education Bi-Plurilingue, Intercompréhension et Compétences Interlinguistiques. See the project website for more information, in French and English : <http://ebp-ici.ecml.at>.

several related languages are spoken or taught, as well as, generally, English (see Cortier, 2009 for a more detailed presentation).

## 5. Conclusion

As can be seen from the above presentation, at the roots of the French education system stands a deep rooted ideological system which promotes monolingualism as well as one specific social norm of French. A homogeneous vision of society is both sought and promoted through education, but this is the case throughout Europe (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998b). In this respect, France is no exception.

Yet the dominant ideology is itself not homogeneous, and the structure of power relations between languages, i.e. between their speakers, has evolved over the past 50 years. Regional languages may have almost disappeared from the public scene, yet activists have succeeded in establishing them in the public system of education, although at its margins.

Other initiatives involving pluralistic approaches have been successfully developed over the past 15 years, but they are not part of the main curriculum and show no signs of being accepted by mainstream policy-makers. Those include ways of integrating all the languages present in the pupils' environment into the system, bearing in mind that no child should feel downgraded for the languages they hold in their repertoire.

Experimentation is therefore possible in the French education system, and many others are currently taking place. Yet, one may question their ability to ever become generalised, given the vitality of traditional ideologies and the lack of concern for societal multilingualism in France.

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## About the Authors

**James Costa** is a researcher at the French National Institute for Pedagogical Research (INRP), where he works in research areas connected with regional minority languages in education in France as well as issues linked with language revitalisation. He was part of the team who, in 2009, completed a report on the sociolinguistic situation of regional minority languages in Rhône-Alpes (the Lyon area in France) and worked on the language policy section of that report, which is available online on the Conseil Régional Rhône-Alpes website. He is currently completing a PhD on the discourses and ideologies of language revitalisation in Provence and Scotland. His research interests range from sociolinguistics and language policy and planning to linguistic anthropology.

**Patricia Lambert** is a university professor (*maître de conférences*) in sociolinguistics and language didactics, and a researcher at the National Institute for Pedagogical Research (INRP). She was part of the team that worked on the experimentation and implementation of language awareness materials (Evlang) in 1998-2001. She is currently the coordinator of a research project at the INRP concerned with the sociolinguistics of education, language variation and multilingualism. Her other research interests include linguistic anthropology, the ethnography of communication and plurilingual situations in relation with questions linked to immigration.