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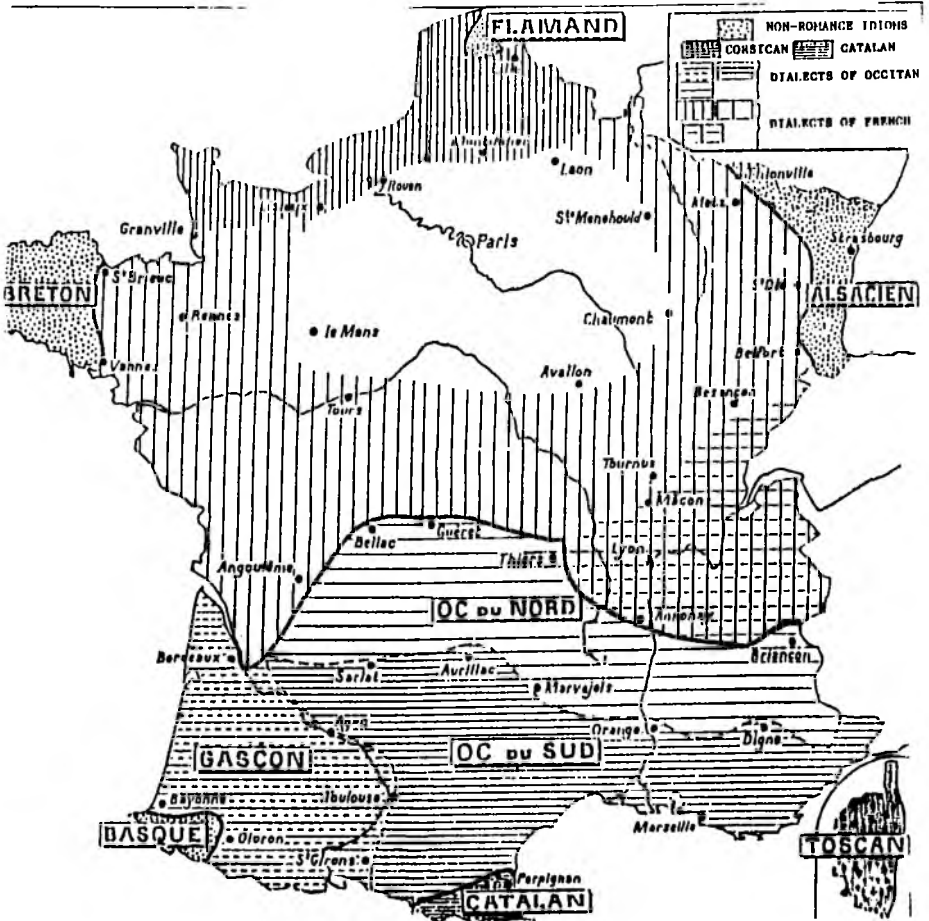
## **THE LINGUISTIC MINORITIES OF FRANCE**

### **ABSTRACT**

Although France is one of the most centralized countries in Europe, its apparent unity must not conceal that it is made up of many linguistic groups, and that French has only in recent years succeeded in becoming the common language of all the French. The situation of each one of the seven non-official languages of France is at first examined. The problem is then situated in its historical context, with the emphasis falling on why and how the French state tried to destroy them. Although the monarchy did not go much further than to impose French as the language of the administration, the revolutionary period was the beginning of a deliberate attempt to substitute French for the regional languages even in informal and oral usage. This was really made possible when education became compulsory; the school system was then the means of spreading French throughout the country. Nowadays the unity of France is no longer at stake, but its very identity is being threatened by the demographic weight, on French soil, of the immigrants from the Third-World.

France is without any possible doubt the most heterogeneous country in Western Europe, as it includes no less than seven linguistic minorities : Corsicans, Basques, Catalans, Occitans, Alsatians, Flemish and

# THE LANGUAGES OF FRANCE



Bretons.<sup>1</sup> Most of these were conquered by means of wars. Each one of them at one time had formed an independent state, or had been part of a neighbouring state.

The necessity to keep so many different peoples united may, to a certain extent, be the reason why post-Monarchist France elaborated an extremely centralized system of government with its inevitable consequence: an attempt to destroy the various languages spoken in the country. That this was quite a success can be seen not only in the fast gallicization of the different linguistic minorities, but also in the absence among them nowadays of any widespread national feeling or claims. Unlike Britain or Spain, continental France has no *real* minority problem.<sup>2</sup>

## I. A LINGUISTIC SURVEY

It is extremely difficult to estimate precisely the number of French citizens capable of speaking what is commonly called a "regional language", as no serious investigations have ever been made on this point.<sup>3</sup> Besides, it is useful to differentiate between those who use a regional language as a daily means of expression, and those who, although being bilingual, have chosen to use French in everyday life and, therefore, do not take part in the transmission of their mother language. It must also be pointed out that all French citizens now have a sound knowledge of their national language. It was not so one century or even fifty years ago.

The literary production in the various non-official languages of France is of course scarce. Usually those who speak a regional language from birth are unable to read it. Even the very best poets and novelists who make use of a regional language remain unknown to the general

<sup>1</sup> The problem of the linguistic minorities in the overseas possessions of France ("*départements et territoires d'outre-mer*") is a different one and will not be discussed in this article.

<sup>2</sup> Only in Corsica is the French authority seriously questioned, but the demographic situation of the Corsicans gives little weight to their claims and demands.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike the case in most multi-lingual countries, where this is not a "taboo" problem.

public in the language of which they write. The folk singers (some of them committed to politics) had some success in the seventies, but the interest of the public seems to be declining. As for radio and television programmes, they are still scarce, although their number has been somewhat increased in recent years, and they are usually not broadcast during peak listening hours.

**Corsican.**—<sup>4</sup> According to the linguists, Corsican is but an Italian dialect, very close to Tuscan, which is the basis of standard Italian. For historical reasons, however, the Corsicans do not agree. They speak of a *lingua corsa*, and refuse to be included in the linguistic — let alone national — Italian community. (The notion of linguistic unity is indeed extremely subjective. The scientific analysis of any group of related dialects must not conceal the socio-cultural reality.) Corsican is therefore a sociologically independent language, and its relations with Italian are very similar to those of Afrikaans with Dutch.

The total population of the island is less than 300,000 inhabitants, of whom approximately 60% only are Corsicans, the rest being continental French, *Pieds-Noirs* (French from northern Africa) and Arab immigrants. According to a poll published in 1980 by the I.N.S.E.E. (*Institut National des Statistiques & des Etudes Economiques*), 80% of the Corsicans considered that they could speak their native language. These results have been questioned by the autonomists, who claim that their language is dying. The point is that, although Corsican is spoken widely among adults (especially in rural areas, but also in the towns), young people tend to switch to French: people over 35 years of age are usually completely bilingual; those between 25 and 35 can understand the language fairly well, but not all of them can speak it fluently; younger Corsicans very often speak only French, although many of them can still understand their own language.

The Corsicans, however, are conscious and proud of their identity. In 1983, the *Assemblée régionale* (sort of regional parliament), unanimously asked the French socialist government to make the Corsican language a compulsory subject in every school on the island. This claim was

<sup>4</sup> Genoa sold the Island of Corsica to France in 1767.

rejected.<sup>5</sup>

Today, the demographic situation is certainly the toughest enemy of Corsican, as the native population keeps diminishing, and young people keep leaving the island to settle in continental France in order to escape unemployment.

**Basque**<sup>6</sup> (or *Euskara*). — It is spoken in part of the South-Western department of *Pyrénées-Atlantiques*. The towns of Bayonne and Biarritz, although usually considered as being part of the *Pays basque*, are in fact Occitan, as Basque has never been the mother language of the population. Basque is also spoken in North-Western Spain.

The total population of the French Basque zone is approximately 230,000 people of whom, according to the estimates, between 60,000 and 80,000 are Basque-speaking. The coast, devoted to tourism, is extremely cosmopolitan, but the interior of the country has remained more traditional. The feeling of belonging to the same community as the Spanish Basques is quite widespread among the population. Until recently, the French *Pays basque*, unlike its Spanish counterpart, was very quiet. During the seventies, however, the revolutionary myth of the E.T.A. (clandestine independentist Spanish Basque organization) contaminated the country and some clandestine terrorist groups have since then been bombing buildings and even shooting policemen. Unlike Corsican, Basque is rapidly falling into disuse (in France as well as in Spain). Its death would be a great loss, as it is related to no other language in the world, and was spoken long before the Indo-Europeans spread over the continent. This unique people, who resisted so many invaders, might well have to surrender linguistically in a near future, even though *Euskara* recently became, together with Spanish, the official language of the Basque provinces in Spain.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The French Socialists had shown much sympathy and understanding towards the fate of the regional languages, but changed their attitude when they came into power.

<sup>6</sup> The three northern Basque provinces were annexed to France between the XV and the XVII centuries.

<sup>7</sup> The Spanish Basques, however, created private primary and secondary Basque schools in order to prevent their language from falling into disuse. These *ikastolak* are today a great success and the creation of a University is envisaged. Similar elementary schools were created in France in almost every linguistic zone (*calandretas* in Occitany, *brecolas* in Roussillon, *diwan* in Brittany, etc.), although with much less success.

**Catalan.**<sup>8</sup> — This romance language is used in the South-Eastern department of *Pyrénées-Orientales*, also called *Roussillon*. Like Basque, it is also spoken on the other side of the border (Catalonia, Valencia, the Balearic Islands). It is also the official language of the tiny state of Andorra. Since the death of General Franco, Catalan in Spain has been regaining ground and prestige. Not only is it widely spoken by all the natives (regardless of their social class), but it has been established as the official language of the province, together with Spanish. The situation in France is quite different: Catalan in Roussillon has only a dialect status. An official language on one side of the border, a *patois* on the other side, Catalan is in much the same situation as Basque, the only difference being that, in spite of its official standing, Basque is declining in Spain.

The revival of Catalan in Spain has had no influence in Roussillon. Out of less than 300,000 people, not much more than one half would be able to express themselves in Catalan. There is no real national feeling, and the autonomists are very few.

**Occitan.**<sup>9</sup> — This romance language is geographically the most important regional language in France. It is spoken in thirty-one departments in the South — approximately one third of the area of the French state. It is also spoken in some valleys in Piedmont (Italy) and in the Spanish — or, to be more precise, Catalanian — Vall d'Aran. The total population of the Occitan-speaking regions is about 13 million people.

Occitan is also called *Langue d'Oc*, or *Provençal*. The latter term is ambiguous, since it designates both the language as a whole and the particular dialect spoken in Provence itself. Owing to this ambiguity, the term Occitan is nowadays the one most widely used amongst linguists.

The Occitan language may pride itself on having given to the world quite a lot of literary masterpieces from the *Troubadours* (Middle Ages), up to the works of Frédéric Mistral (Nobel Prize in 1905, at a time when this honour was not bestowed upon someone for mere ideological con-

<sup>8</sup> Roussillon became a French province in 1659.

<sup>9</sup> The different Occitan-speaking provinces were annexed to France between 1271 (County of Toulouse) and 1860 (County of Nice).

formity ...) and Jean Boudou. It is, however, dying, and one could spend many years in an Occitan town without hearing one complete sentence in the local language.

It is not realistic to estimate, as some academicians do, that about eight million people today are potential speakers of Occitan (cf. Lafont, 1972 & Bec, 1973). It is quite clear to anyone who has lived in the country that most Occitans speak only French, not only in the towns, but even in rural areas. Only in certain remote and mountainous regions is Occitan comparatively widely used. In brief, about four million people may be considered to have some more or less fluent knowledge of the language; those among them who use it as an everyday language certainly do not exceed 500,000.

There is no national feeling whatsoever. The Occitans, unlike the Basques, the Corsicans or the Catalans, feel more French than the "real" Frenchmen.<sup>10</sup> They have no feeling of belonging to a community that includes the several regions they live in. Besides, Occitan is used only between relatives or friends. Whenever addressing a stranger, any Occitan-speaking person will normally switch to French (cf. Pach, 1981).

The different dialects are extremely different from each other, and there is no standard literary language, in spite of the efforts of the XIXth century *félibres*,<sup>11</sup> who tried (though not all of them) to promote the Provençal dialect, under the pretence that Frédéric Mistral (a Provençal) had been the Dante of the country. What is more, Occitan can be spelt in two different ways (one more or less based upon the French spelling, the other based upon the mediaeval spelling), and there is a constant controversy between the supporters of each one. The collapse of the Occitan language will be complete in a near future.

<sup>10</sup> Foreigners also have this impression. When trying to picture a typical French village, they imagine a southern one. And the stereotyped Frenchman will be pictured as a Latin man.

<sup>11</sup> The *félibres* were members of a literary school which tried to promote, from the second half of the XIX century on, the Occitan language, as well as the national identity of the southern provinces of France

**Alsatian.**<sup>12</sup> — Because of historical circumstances, Alsace having been alternately German and French. The Alsatian dialect is in a stronger situation than any other French regional language except Corsican. All speakers are conscious of using a variety of German. The proximity of Germany, the fact that many Alsatians work there, the television and radio programmes from neighbouring Germany certainly help Alsatian to remain alive. Two daily newspapers publish a German edition (the law, however, prescribes that 25% of the articles must be in French), and the most important German newspapers and magazines can be bought in Alsace. Standard German is accepted as the literary language, the *koinè* common to all German speaking countries. The Alsatians, unlike the Corsicans, instead of isolating themselves, want to keep a linguistic link with the German community *lato sensu*, and 75% of the children over the age of nine are taught *Hochsprache* at school.

It would be quite wrong, however, to think that Alsatian has nothing to fear. It is estimated that 70% of the adult population speak the dialect as a daily means of communication, but the number of children who can speak Alsatian is infinitely lower: less than 10% in some schools in towns like Strasbourg or Mulhouse. Listening to children at play gives a far more accurate idea of the state of health of Alsatian. Obviously, the dialect is no longer transmitted normally from father to son. The regression is unavoidable.

**Flemish.**<sup>13</sup> — This other germanic language is spoken only in a tiny area of extreme North-Eastern France. About 100,000 persons might still have some knowledge of Flemish, although a lower estimate would certainly be more accurate. The high industrialization of the area provoked the immigration of many foreign workers from different countries, and this fact certainly helped the propagation of French as a language of communication.

**Breton.**<sup>14</sup> — A Celtic language, Breton is closely related to Welsh. It is

<sup>12</sup> Alsace became definitively French in 1944.

<sup>13</sup> The territory where Flemish is spoken was annexed to France under the reign of Louis XIV.

<sup>14</sup> Brittany was annexed to France in 1532



not considered to be a remnant of the Celtic languages spoken throughout Gaul before the Roman conquest. It is generally believed that it was imported from Great Britain during the fourth and fifth centuries, when the Celts fled from the Germanic invaders.<sup>15</sup> Breton is the natural language of only the occidental half of Brittany. In 1914, about 90% of the people there spoke Breton, and many of them could not even understand French. Nowadays, it seems that 500,000 persons have a knowledge of Breton. Among them, it is believed that about 200,000 to 250,000 persons use it daily as a language of communication.

## II. THE POLICY OF THE STATE

**The Monarchy.** The French Monarchy never tried to destroy the various languages that were in use in the country, not only because it did not have the means to implement such a policy,<sup>16</sup> but chiefly because the myth of “one country, one language” was something quite unknown before the French Revolution. Therefore, the linguistic policy of the French Royalty was merely directed at imposing French as the language of the administration.

On 28 December 1490, Charles VIII ordered that the statements made by witnesses in the Courts of the province of Languedoc should be written down in “French language or mother language”. The “enemy”, it is clear, was Latin. Later on, in 1510, Louis XII, in his general Ordinance on the Reformation of Justice, ordered that all the criminal trials and investigations should be made in *vulgaire et langage du pais ou [ils] seront faits* (vernacular and language of the place where they would take place). It must be stressed that the regional languages were still on equal terms with French.

Things, however, were to change in 1539. Francois I, in this Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts, a major one, imposed the supremacy of French : under the pretence that the use of Latin caused certain misunderstand-

<sup>15</sup> Some linguists believe that the old Celtic language had not altogether disappeared. This fact might account for the originality of the *Vannetais* dialect.

<sup>16</sup> It is a fact that the French monarchy was far from devoid of a centralizing will. However, these efforts always came up against the freedoms of the Provinces and the interests of the nobility, until Louis XIV really imposed the authority of the State.

ings, he ordered that all legal acts should be made in “*langage mater-  
nel françois et non autrement*” (French mother tongue, and not other-  
wise). However, this ordinance was merely the acknowledgement of a  
fact : by 1539, French — the language of the king — was already *de  
facto* the only “noble” language of the kingdom. The Occitan idiom,  
for instance, which had flourished during the Middle Ages as one of  
the major literary languages of Europe, was no longer used for serious  
literature.

All this, of course, had little impact on the people itself. But what the  
non-French-speaking subjects of the King of France were definitely made  
to realize was that French was a superior language, and their native  
idiom an inferior one, not worthy of being used in formal circumstances  
nor for serious literary works.

When a people is deprived of a national state and, through the hazards  
of history, comes to be ruled by a foreign administration, its language  
inevitably loses prestige. The intellectual and social *élites* always tend  
to switch to the language of the Prince — the only one that really pays.  
From then on, the regional languages of France would be officially con-  
demned to second-class status, losing ground among the nobility, then  
among the middle-class and eventually — but not before the late  
nineteenth century — among the working classes and peasantry. The  
minorities that France would subsequently annex would suffer the same  
fate.

**The revolutionary period.** In 1789, when the French Revolution broke  
out, French had undoubtedly strengthened its position, but was still a  
foreign language to the vast majority of the people. Even those who lived  
in the traditionally French-speaking part of the kingdom (beyond a zone  
of a few leagues around Paris) often used varieties of French that greatly  
differed from the standard language. The Revolution was therefore im-  
mediately confronted with the linguistic problem — and with a serious  
contradiction. On the one hand, it was necessary to use the dialects  
in order to rally the people to the new political order and to propagate  
the new revolutionary ideology; on the other hand, the variety of  
languages spoken in France appeared as a menace: the national unity  
was at stake. Very soon the second attitude prevailed amongst the po-

litical rulers, and the State was bent upon destroying the *patois*.<sup>17</sup> As early as August 1790, the Abbé Grégoire — a priest — started a huge nation-wide investigation. His correspondents throughout France had, among other things, to answer the following questions: “What would be the religious and political importance of completely destroying the *patois*?” and “What means could be used?”. This was undoubtedly the start of the war that the French state has since then been waging against the regional languages of the country. (For the answers received by Grégoire and his report to the Convention, cf. Gazier, 1880.)

The reason for attempting to destroy them was clearly expressed by Bertrand Barrère, a member of the *Comité de Salut Public*, in January 1794: “Federalism and superstition speak Breton; emigration and the hatred of the Republic speak German; the counter-Revolution speaks Italian, and fanaticism speaks Basque. Let us break these instruments of damage and error”. In short, for one country, only one language was necessary: “Citizens, the language of a free people must be one, and the same for all” (for the complete text, see de Certeau, Julia, Revel, 1975).

On the political scene, a new idea of France was about to be born, based upon a nationalist, expansionist and centralizing ideology. The centrifugal forces among the revolutionaries having been defeated, the myth of a complete national unity and uniformity would make of the old provincial freedoms a mere historical reference, a dream of the past.

**Compulsory Schooling.** It was under the Third Republic that the French State dealt the final blow. In 1881, education became compulsory.

In the course of many years, the French educational system waged a raging war on all that was called *patois*, i.e. any language other than French. Schoolboys who uttered a word in their native language were punished, even humiliated. Since the end of the last century the *signal* system was broadly used in French schools until the moment when it was no longer necessary, because of the fact that the French had suc-

<sup>17</sup> The dialects were also considered as remnants of the feudal order and, as such, had to disappear.

ceeded in supplanting the regional languages.<sup>18</sup> A boy who was caught in the act of speaking his native language was given an object (sometimes a key, or a coin, or a piece of wood ...) and could only get rid of this *signal* by giving it to the first friend he heard speaking *patois*. The last possessor of the *signal*, at the end of the school day, was punished. This, of course, was an incentive to impeachment of each other. In some rural areas, schoolmasters used to hang the boys' *sabots* (wooden shoes) around their necks as a sign of dishonour. Some other masters made the guilty children copy a number of times: "I shall not speak *patois* any more". In some schools in Brittany a placard which was hung on the wall read: "It is forbidden to spit on the ground and to speak Breton". One can imagine the trauma caused to children who had been brought up in a certain language and suddenly discovered that speaking it was shameful and ridiculous.

This method produced good results. French gained ground throughout France, even in the remotest areas. Over a period of fifty years the school teachers<sup>19</sup> succeeded in making French the language of the whole nation, in spite of the protests of many regional intellectuals who considered that the death of the regional languages would be an irretrievable loss. Among them were the Provençal *félibres*,<sup>20</sup> who, having restored the literary dignity of their discarded language, tried in vain to obtain for it the position it deserved in the schools. But they came up against a political will: the greatness of France and the universality of the French language. It is in this light that we must read the following extract of an open letter from the socialist writer Emile Zola to Frédéric Mistral, in 1868: "Nothing remains of the old nation [the Provençal nation] but a corrupted *patois* which loses purity and falls into disuse even more every day. Only a sleeping nation may wake up, and you are a dead one, a nationality that has become part for ever of a larger one. You shall not succeed in revitalizing your old language, because this

<sup>18</sup> Some very similar systems were used in other countries, including South Africa, where the English tried by various means to eradicate the Afrikaans language.

<sup>19</sup> They were called *Les hussards noirs de la République* (the black hussars of the Republic): public instruction was also, at a period when the monarchists were many, republican propaganda.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. note 11.

language was linked to a civilization that has disappeared. You would have to be able to restore the conditions both of existence and development that almost made, at a certain period, a real major language of the Provençal idiom. Today, this is historically and morally impossible. Such is fate; you rebel in vain. Crowds mix among crowds, men hold out their hands to each other and forget the cradle in order to gradually create the great free nation of the future [...]. Just imagine that your dream should come true tomorrow: Provence frees itself from France and lives separated, with its language, its habits, its laws. Brittany will do the same. Our provinces will thus go away one after the other; the work of several centuries will be destroyed; France, which has hardly emerged from its long process of unification, and begins to call all its children — those from the North and from the South — with the purpose of gathering them under the flag of liberty, will be destroyed. It is of *this* flag that you must be proud; it is the one that you shall stick with us on the world” (quoted by Decremps, 1954:187-188). These words are typical of the ideas of the French centralists at the end of the nineteenth century.

**The Deixonne Law.** Only when it was clear that French had irremediably won could the French State pay attention to the languages that had been half buried. Hence, in 1951, came the Deixonne law, which organised the teaching of the various regional languages in primary and secondary schools. This law was voted in by a tiny majority, in spite of a very vehement campaign against it, organized by all the *jacobins* and centralists. Those, however, had nothing much to be afraid of. The teaching of Breton, Basque, Catalan and Occitan (the only languages mentioned in the law) was not compulsory. Besides, the conditions of teaching were made very difficult, and the training of competent masters was not even envisaged.<sup>21</sup> In short, this law had only a symbolical importance, and the authorities were not prepared to do much about it. (For more details about the Deixonne law, cf. Baris, 1978:101-109.)

It was obviously too late. In order to survive, a language must be transmitted from generation to generation, and have a normal status which enables its speakers to use it in every possible circumstance. The Deix-

<sup>21</sup> Even nowadays, any teacher, whatever his subject, who volunteers to teach a regional language, will do so without having received any pedagogical training. Not even his knowledge of the regional language he wants to teach will be tested. The quality of the teaching, therefore, very often is not up to standard.

onne law was of no use, since the French society was not considering giving the other languages of France equal rights and opportunities.

Nothing much has changed since then, apart from the fact that, with the passing of the generations, the process of eradication of the regional languages is near to completion. In recent years, many cultural associations have appeared which have tried to promote the regional languages and obtain for them an official status. Many autonomistic groups and parties have also been created — many of them being Marxist-orientated —, but none has ever become popular, nor gained an audience among the people. The linguistic minorities of France are now well on the way to being dissolved within the French melting-pot and it may be foreseen that their various languages, which are but remnants of an archaic and obsolete state of things, will soon disappear. The influence of the modern *media* as well as the mobility of the populations will accelerate this process. The younger generations are no longer interested in what they consider a rear-guard fight and the timid decisions of the socialist government in 1985, especially the creation of a national council of regional languages and cultures, came too late.<sup>22</sup>

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We are now at the end of a very long nation-making process. As Alain Peyrefitte, former Minister of Justice, put it: "The French State has given birth to the French nation. It is the artificial creation of an interventionist, controlling State, adverse to initiative and distrustful of the *Province*"<sup>23</sup> (quoted by Gendre & Javelier, 1978:53). And Alexandre Sanguinetti, Deputy of Toulouse, says: "It is thanks to centralization that France could be created, despite the French or with the indifference of the French [...] It is no wonder that seven centuries of Monarchy, Empire or Republic have been bent on centralization: It is because France is not a natural construction. It is a deliberate political construction, for which the central power never gave up fighting" (*ibid*).

<sup>22</sup> The idea of the socialists was also extremely ambiguous, as they put on the same level the languages of France and those spoken by the immigrants, the constitution of a multi-racial French society being one of their aims.

<sup>23</sup> Used in the singular, the word *Province* means: all the regions of France, with the exception of Paris and its vicinity.

Ironically enough, now that France has destroyed all the elements that could compromise its *unity* from the inside, something new is appearing that might more surely destroy its very *identity*. An uncontrolled wave of immigration, mostly from the former colonies, has brought into the country a few million foreigners who, because of their race, culture and religion, are not likely to be assimilated as easily as the Alsatians or the Corsicans. Islam is the second religion of France as far as the number of practitioners is concerned, and Arabic is more widely spoken than any regional language. Because of their higher fecundity, the Arabs and Blacks in France are a real danger, and a recent demographic prospective investigation<sup>24</sup> showed that, by the year 2015, in the eventuality that nothing should change, the French society would be completely overwhelmed by this alien and prolific burden.

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A series of articles appeared in the daily newspaper *Le Figaro* between 22 and 29 August 1985, dealing with the problem of the regional languages of France. Although not of much scientific value, they give interesting data as well as a fairly accurate picture of the linguistic reality in France.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Le Figaro Magazine*, no. 312, 26 October – 1 November 1985: *Serons-nous encore français dans trente ans?*, by J. Raspail and G.F. Dumont (Head of the *Institut de démographie politique*). Cf. also the following issues for the ensuing controversy.