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Language transmission in France in the course of the 20th century

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“French shall be the only language of education”, proclaimed the Ministerial Order of 7 June 1880 laying down the model primary school regulations. “The language of the Republic is French”, recently added article 2 of the Constitution (1992). But do families follow the strictures of state education and institutions? What were the real linguistic practices of the population of France in the last century? Sandwiched between the monopoly of the national language and the spread of English, what has become of French regional dialects, and what is happening to the languages introduced by immigration?

◆ Hundreds of languages known to a quarter of the adult population

The exceptionally large sample (380,000 people) of the Families Survey means that an answer can be given to these questions (box). The most striking thing is the rich mix of languages known. On being asked “in which language, dialect or patois” their father and mother in that order “usually” spoke to them at about age 5, a high percentage of respondents — 26% of the adults now living in metropolitan France, or 11.5 million people — recalled that their parents spoke to them in another language as well as or instead of French. In six out of ten cases, that language was transmitted concurrently with French. Half of the cases were regional or frontier languages; the other half were languages of immigration, and were learned before or after resettlement in France. No less than 6,700 language and dialect descriptions were reported, matching nearly 400 languages identified in the Summer

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Institute of Linguistics’ languages of the world database [4]. The ten most frequently recalled childhood languages are cited by two thirds of the respondents, while a much larger number are recalled by a bare handful.

The Families Survey distinguishes languages “usually” spoken by parents with their children (figure 1A) from those which they “also” spoke to them, i.e., occasionally-used languages (figure 1B). This

The linguistic strand of the Families survey

The Families survey linked to the March 1999 census, entitled “Family History Survey”, was carried out by INSEE and co-designed with INED [1]; the results are being used by both institutes [2]. The strand on linguistic practices received funding from the National Commission for the French Language and the Languages of France (DGLFLF).

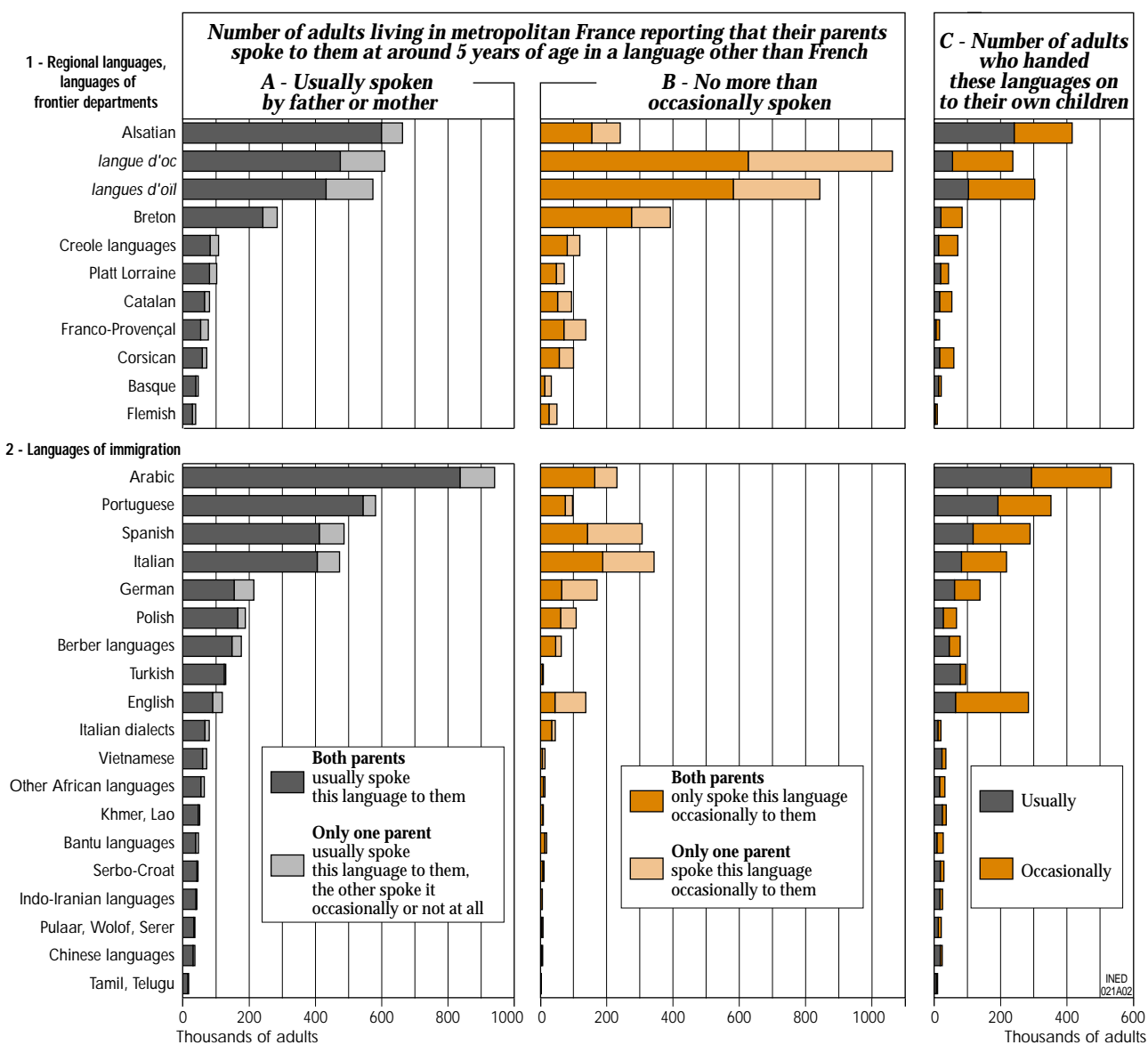
Preceded by an exploratory survey conducted in 1992 on a sample of 5,300 parents of schoolchildren [3], this strand breaks new ground in French public statistics collection. Never has such a consistent picture been constructed of all the languages spoken in the country from such a large national sample. The questionnaires were completed at the same time as the census returns by 380,000 adults living in metropolitan France, the oldest of whom were born before World War One. The sample was made more representative by deliberately over-representing certain areas (Flanders, Alsace, Moselle, Corsica, the Catalan Region, the Basque Region, Brittany), then rectifying the results for publication.

contrast between the two practices is informative. The transmission of languages of immigration in childhood was more often usual than occasional: 940,000 adults living in metropolitan France recall that their parents initially spoke Arabic to them in their earliest childhood, against only 230,000 who recall occasional transmission, generally secondary to French. Likewise Portuguese, which was handed on to 580,000 adults on a usual basis, versus 100,000 on a purely occasional basis. Spanish and Italian—both languages of longer-established immigration—had a higher frequency of secondary transmission. Lastly, the diversi-

fication of immigration flows has led to the appearance of new African and Asian language families whose method of transmission—almost always usual—reflects more recent arrival: they have generally been acquired from both parents in the country of origin pre-immigration. Turkish is a similar case in point.

Unlike foreign languages, most regional languages were transmitted only on an occasional basis, secondarily to French, and more often by one parent only. This was particularly so for the *langue d'oc* and the *langues d'oïl*, already being rapidly lost among the

Figure 1 - Main languages other than French received in childhood and transmitted to the next generation



Coverage: adults living in metropolitan France.

Interpretation: 660,000 adults reported that their father and/or mother usually spoke Alsatian to them when they were 5 years old (including 600,000 both parents). A further 240,000 said that their parents only spoke Alsatian to them occasionally (these two figures are additive and cover a period from 1905 to approximately 1985). 410,000 of these adults handed on Alsatian to their children in turn.

Source: INSEE, Families survey 1999.

older generation. That notwithstanding, both languages were recalled from the childhoods of very many still-living adults: 610,000 usually and 1,060,000 on a purely secondary basis for the *langue d'oc* (Occitan and its variants: Nissart, Provençal, Languedocien, Rouergat, Limousin, Gascon), 570,000 and 850,000 for the *langues d'oïl* (Picard, chtimi or "Northern patois", Lorraine Romance, Norman, Gallo-Breton, Vendeen, Bourbonnais, etc.).

280,000 people recall frequently having had Breton spoken to them in childhood, and another 400,000 had it transmitted secondarily to French. Alongside Corsican, Catalan and the Creole languages (bearing in mind that the survey was confined to metropolitan France), Breton is one of the languages whose transmission was even then more often occasional than usual, although the shift was less acute than for the *langues d'oïl* and *langue d'oc*. Not so Alsatian, which even a generation ago was still the best-transmitted regional language, being transmitted more usually (660,000 people) than occasionally (240,000). Likewise, across most of nearby Moselle, families still usually communicated in a Frankish dialect, Platt Lorraine. Elsewhere in France, only Basque was in a similar situation.

◆ A one-in-three parent-child transmission rate

Is the linguistic heritage of childhood being passed on to the next generation? The Families survey asked adults currently living in metropolitan France in which languages they themselves spoke to their young children, if they had any (figure 1C), bearing in mind that parent-child transmission can increase proportionately to the number of children. Looking at adults (figure 2) whose parents usually spoke a particular language to them, how many did likewise with their children? Little more than a third (35%). The proportion barely changes if occasional use is included for the two generations: 26% of adults surveyed had a linguistic heritage of a language other than French; but only 9% passed it on to their own children (4 million people against 11.5).

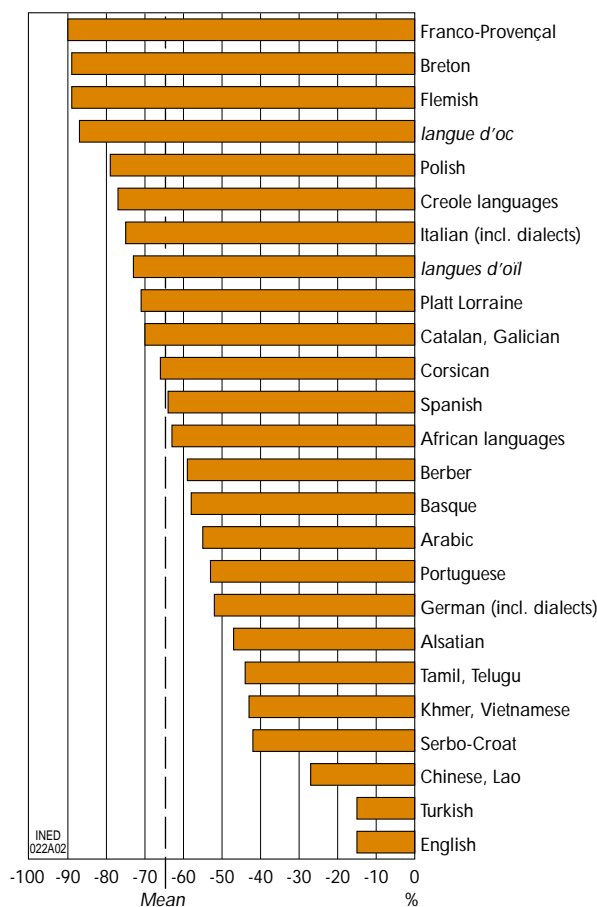
Frequency of disruption was particularly high for regional languages. Only Alsatian enjoyed a reprieve: the chain of usual-language transmission was broken in only 47% of cases. Basque and Corsican are in accelerating decline (58% and 66%) but holding up better than Catalan, Platt, *langues d'oïl* and the Creole languages (between 70% and 80% loss). The plight of Franco-Provençal, Breton, Flemish and the *langue d'oc* is more critical: nine times out of ten they had been lost to usual use by the next generation.

Foreign languages are also affected, experiencing shift from one generation to the next as they are ousted by French. And one in two times where they are handed on, it is in occasional use only. It is true that

the share of adults who have inherited a foreign language from their parents has increased in France with rising immigration. Since the late Sixties, for example, Arabic has become the linguistic heritage of 3% rather than 1% of adults living in France. But over time, settled immigrants have tended to shift towards the use of French in the family. The transmission of Arabic as a usual language has declined by over half in the span of a generation, in the same way as Berber and Portuguese, to a comparable extent with that of Basque or Alsatian. So the share of the monolingual French-speaking community has risen steadily for a century (figure 3). But a new factor has now been added to the scene—English, often transmitted to children but not forming part of the family linguistic heritage.

The fact is that when the survey adults were questioned on the languages spoken in non-parent/child

Figure 2 - Language loss in a generation: proportion of fathers who did not usually speak to their 5-year-old children in the language that their own father usually spoke in to them at the same age

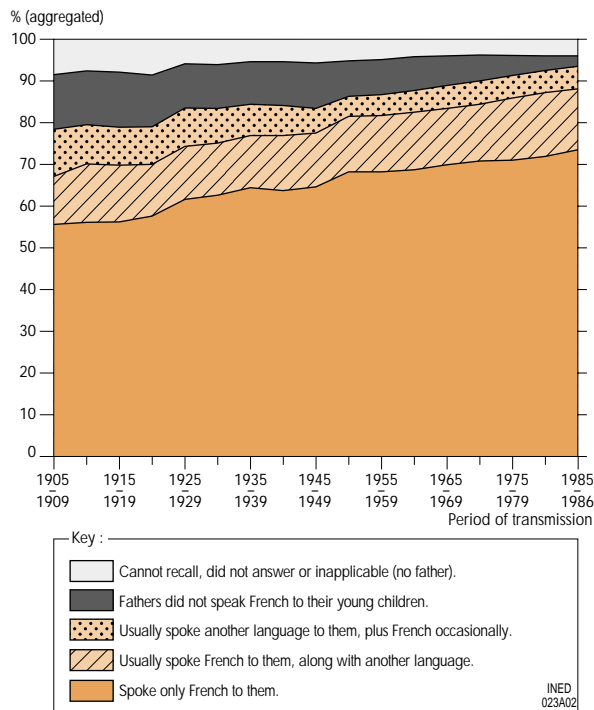


Coverage: adult men living in metropolitan France.

Interpretation: 90% of now-adult men whose fathers usually spoke to them in Franco-Provençal in their childhood at about 5 years of age did not do likewise with their own children.

Source: INSEE, Families survey 1999.

Figure 3 - Shift to French in family transmission over the 20th century: languages spoken by the father to his children at about 5 years of age



Coverage: adults living in metropolitan France (N.B.: similar results, not reported here, were found for maternal transmission)

Source: INSEE, Families survey 1999.

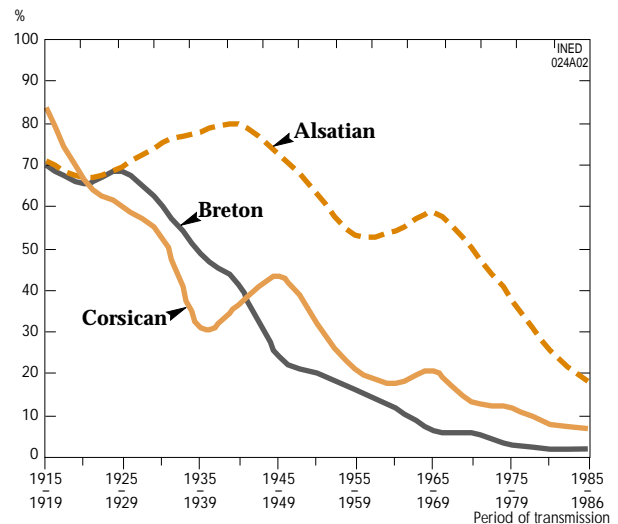
relations, English stands out as France's foremost minority language: 20% of adults—9 million people—report that they “sometimes talk with significant others (spouse, parents, friends, colleagues, shopkeepers, etc.) in languages other than French”. Of these, 2,725,000 cited English—more than for Arabic (938,000 adult speakers) or Portuguese (591,000). Foreign languages learned at school also favour—in order—Spanish (1,134,000), German (824,000) and Italian (740,000).

Regional languages are less widely-spoken, but go beyond family circle transmission. Alsatian has approximately 548,000 adult speakers, Occitan 526,000, Breton 304,000, *langues d'oïl* 204,000, Catalan 132,000, Corsican 122,000, Platt Lorraine 78,000 and Basque 44,000. All these languages are frequently spoken between adults in a non-parent-child transmission context.

◆ Reversing the shift?

This being so, what is the likely future for these languages? The transmission rates calculated on the basis of regional populations confirm the extent of their loss throughout the 20th century (figure 4). However, according to a detailed analysis by the American linguist Joshua Fishman [5] of the way in which some languages have successfully “reversed the shift” (French in Quebec, Catalan in Catalonia, Hebrew in

Figure 4 - Rates of usual-language transmission of regional languages to children aged 5, exemplified by Corsican, Alsatian and Breton since World War One



Interpretation: 70% of parents born in Alsace usually spoke Alsatian to their young children in 1915-1919, compared to 18% during the most recent period. The proportions are calculated on the estimated population of each region (Alsace, Corsica, western Brittany) in each period. Other methods of calculation are possible, but do not affect the general trend. Note that the restoration of Alsace to France after each world war was followed by a wave of gallicization which temporarily accelerated language loss.

Source: INSEE, Families survey 1999 and censuses.

Israel), a language which is endangered or has become moribund can regain ground if all generations of the family ensure that it is handed down by ongoing action which backstops institutional efforts, on good terms with the national language. The question is, how to get there when the precise state of family transmission is not known? The Families survey bridges that gap by applying a single approach to all languages, regional or national, learned at home or at school. It confirms the undisputed predominance of French, and the increased use of languages taught at school, but also reveals the abundant linguistic heritage which comes from our diverse origins and experiences. French does not eradicate, but adds to, that heritage.

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