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Regional and Minority Languages in France: Policies of Homogenization or a Move toward Heterogeneity? A Case Study on Francoprovençal

by James W. Hawkey and Jonathan R. Kasstan

THE NOTION OF INTERACTION between French and other languages may bring to mind postcolonial settings where French coexists with autochthonous linguistic varieties, or scenarios leading to the formation of pidgins or creoles. However, within the borders of metropolitan France, the interplay between French and France's regional and minority languages (RMLs) can yield fruitful topics of discussion. The interaction between French and other native linguistic varieties is often overlooked, due to an image of politically-motivated linguistic homogeneity (the view of France as monolingual is enshrined in the Constitution of the Fifth Republic). For more than a century, ideas of homogeneity have predominated in French-language policy discourse at the expense of France's RMLs. Some scholars suggest that France's one-language-one-nation ideology is so clearly formulated that the RMLs spoken within *l'Hexagone* are viewed only with an "unusual intolerance" (Grenoble and Whaley 5), which is perhaps surprising for a pillar-state of the European Union.

Might this state of affairs be changing? While "administrative obstacles still continue to block full institutionalization [of RMLs], it has become socially acceptable to speak [...] other non-French languages in France" (Kuter 85). What, then, of the barrier of institution? To what extent can an increase in political visibility for RMLs be attested? These questions will be addressed and an illustrative example provided in the form of a case study of Francoprovençal, a RML spoken in southeastern France, but also in parts of Switzerland and Italy, by roughly less than 1% of the total regional population. We begin with a discussion of the linguistically homogenizing stance adopted by the French government, by examining the history of France as an ethnolinguistically homogeneous polity, and by addressing present-day examples of homogenizing language policies in France. We then present the argument that France might now be moving toward a marginally more heterogeneous stance, with new policies favoring the representation of

RMLs. Lastly, we examine the case of Francoprovençal, before offering a brief discussion and a summary of topics warranting more detailed research.

Homogenizing Linguistic Tendencies in France

Spolsky (58), after Lambert (5), uses the phrase “ethnolinguistically homogeneous” to describe polities that “may contain linguistic minorities, but these are perceived to be small and insignificant and are geographically or socially marginalized.” In terms of language policy, linguistic homogeneity does not therefore refer to communities where members speak only one language to the detriment of all others, and Lambert (7) defines such societies as homogeneous situations in his discussion of the language rights of minority groups. France is offered by Spolsky as a textbook case of a monolingual polity and is described as “constitutionally monolingual” (60), insofar as its current constitution makes no reference to the rights and specific roles of languages other than French. This scenario did not arise spontaneously and was the result of centuries of deliberate manipulation of the role of the different languages spoken in France. This section examines the political history and the current scope of linguistic homogenization in France.

The drive towards linguistic homogenization in France can be attributed in part to a number of sociocultural factors, resulting from centuries of language policies that promote the sole use of French in France. It has been argued that this in turn has resulted in an existing belief system concerning the role of the French language within the French state. Encrevé refers to the relatively extreme concept of *idéologie linguistique française* (ILF): “[L]e citoyen devait non seulement parler français, mais ne parler *que* français en France. Bref, il s’agit d’un monolinguisme d’État dont l’obligation s’étendrait par allégeance citoyenne à chaque individu français” (23).

This state-driven monolingualism is viewed as the result of a series of key moments throughout the course of French political and linguistic history. A classic landmark in the history of language policy is *l’Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts*, signed by François I^{er} in 1539, which decreed that all legislation should be presented “en langage maternel français, et non autrement.” While this act is often cited as the starting point for the spread of French through the legal system, it must be pointed out that the aim was not necessarily to impose the French language, but to diminish the use of Latin through adoption of the vernacular, which would facilitate greater understanding of legislation for those to whom it applied. Individual edicts against non-French-speaking groups in France only began to appear in the late eighteenth century,¹ and it appears that the chief linguistic aim of the *Ancien Régime* was not to force all citizens to speak French, but to make French understood by as many people as possible (De Certeau, Julia,

and Revel 9). It was in post-Revolution France that processes of linguistic homogenization began in earnest. In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, the plurilingual nature of France was openly acknowledged and addressed, with the *Assemblée nationale* announcing in January 1790 that its decrees would be published “dans tous les idiomes qu’on parle dans les différentes parties de la France.” Initially, then, a plurilingual state was to be tolerated. However, this was to change with the *Terreur*, and in 1794 the *Comité de salut public* unequivocally stated the course of action to be followed by the government: “Dans une République une et indivisible la langue doit être une. C’est un fédéralisme que la variété des dialectes [...], il faut le briser entièrement” (Encrevé 25). This followed l’abbé Grégoire’s oft-cited report, *Sur la nécessité et les moyens d’anéantir les patois et d’universaliser la langue française*. The process of linguistic homogenization began immediately, with a committee charged with the creation of a network of “primary” schools across France, whose role it was to teach a number of key subjects, with an emphasis placed on the learning of French (Perrot 160). Nationwide education programs constitute an important tool in the implementation of French linguistic homogenization, with the *lois Jules Ferry* (1881–82), which introduced free, obligatory elementary education, delivered exclusively in French. Encrevé maintains that these historical factors have contributed to the perpetuation of the aforementioned ILF. He claims that the monolingual nature of France is not incompatible with the democratic ideals of the Republic, but he finds problematic the idea that every citizen must also conform to this monolingual ideology, and that, to this end, the French government has engineered the destruction of languages other than French (26). While this viewpoint may be considered extreme, the homogenizing tendencies of the French government in favor of the French language, and to the detriment of others, cannot be denied, and examples of this behavior are still found today.

Language is of key importance to the Fifth Republic, as is evidenced in Article 2 of the Constitution: “La langue de la République est le français.” While the existence of other languages is acknowledged in Article 75.1—“Les langues régionales appartiennent au patrimoine de la France”—this clause was not introduced until 2008. Further, no discussion of the rights of their speakers or of the roles that RMLs are to fulfill is offered. The RMLs are not even listed, and since the French census asks no questions about language use, no official figures reveal how widely spoken these languages are. Another key piece of homogenizing legislation is known as the *loi Toubon* (Loi n° 94-665 du 4 août 1994 relative à l’emploi de la langue française). It outlines the domains of usage of the French language, and from Article 1 determines that French “est la langue de l’enseignement, du travail, des échanges et des services publics.” This was a response to the perceived encroachment of English in scientific and cultural fields (Adrey 128–29), hence the

loi Toubon's protectionist stance. It lists several spheres of activity in which the use of French is mandatory, and while in Article 21 it states that these guidelines do not oppose the use of RMLs, there is no legislative text that serves as a reference as to how these languages are to be used. Moreover, it remains unclear which languages are to be accorded the status of RML. The *loi Toubon* was to be implemented by a number of linguistically homogenizing bodies, chiefly the *Délégation générale à la langue française* (DGLF), alongside other subsidiary "civil" organizations such as *Défense de la langue française* and *Avenir de la langue française* (Adrey 126–29).

Another recent example of linguistically homogenizing tendencies is France's reticence to ratify the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages: <www.conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/148.htm>. The Charter deals with general provisions and their application before proposing a list of 98 "measures to promote the use of regional and minority languages in public life," of which each signatory must put into practice at least 35. France signed the Charter in 1999, several years after the first signatories, but it has yet to be ratified, a process that would probably require amendments to the Constitution.² Prior to signing the Charter, the Carcassonne Report identified 39 measures that were wholly compatible with the Constitution. Notwithstanding, after signing, the *Conseil constitutionnel* deemed that, while the selected measures themselves posed no problems, the general provisions that called for recognition of minority group rights and the use of RMLs in state matters were unconstitutional. The Chirac government refused to amend the Constitution, and the Charter to this day remains unratified (Adrey 136–37).

However, might views on the outlined homogenizing tendencies now be shifting? RMLs have been undergoing a steady transition of "ré-identification" (Lafont 163), whereby those varieties once known as "patois" are now identified as "local," "regional," and "minority" languages (McDonald 53). Evidence of this shift in administrative vocabulary is documented in Éloy's 1997 corpus study of the *Journal officiel des débats*. More recently, Oakes has argued that "regional languages [...] are now very much accepted as part of French heritage" (81). But is there any perceptible shift in language policy?

A Potential Move toward Linguistic Heterogeneity?

On 28 Jan. 2014, the *Assemblée nationale* approved (361 votes in favor, 149 against) a draft law that proposed amending the Constitution through the introduction of a new Article (53.3), so that the Charter would no longer be considered unconstitutional. The suggested Article would allow France to ratify the Charter by making it clear that the use of the term "groups" (in the Charter's second part, which outlines the application of general provisions) does not imply the accordance

of collective rights to RML groups, since the French Constitution is founded on the principle that all citizens are equal, whatever their ethnic, racial, or religious background may be. Moreover, the new Article offers an unambiguous interpretation of the sections of the Charter that refer to “the facilitation and/or encouragement of the use of RMLs, in speech and writing, in public and private life” (7.1.d), and the outlining of provisions for RML use in judicial and administrative contexts. In these cases, the draft amendment to the Constitution makes it clear that the Charter merely puts forward a general idea as to these languages’ uses, which need not run contrary to constitutional principles. Should this amendment be adopted, France would be able to ratify the Charter. However, this is not an imminent possibility: this amendment would require a three-fifths majority in both houses of Parliament before its application, and even then, an independent decision would need to be taken.³ The approval of the Jan. 2014 draft law is therefore the smallest of steps toward a more heterogeneous approach to language policy in France.

These latest developments are not the only political moves toward linguistic heterogeneity in France. The *loi Deixonne* (Loi n° 51-46 du 11 janvier 1951 relative à l’enseignement des langues et dialectes locaux), a key moment in the promotion of RMLs, for the first time allowed one weekly school hour of Breton, Basque, Catalan, or Occitan in areas where these languages are spoken, and offered limited support of regional and minority cultural activities at specific higher education institutions. However, this law was merely a permissive piece of legislation. It offered nothing in terms of resources or training for teachers of RMLs, and was not enacted for eighteen years after its initial approval, due to reluctance on the part of the French government (Ager 68; Pooley 64). This is not to mention the restricted content of the law, with a maximum of one optional hour a week and only four RMLs recognized.

Drives toward linguistic heterogeneity and recognition of RMLs in France are not limited to small concessions like the *loi Deixonne*. The *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France* (DGLFLF) operates under the auspices of the *Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication* and is responsible for the development of French language policy. The DGLFLF has gone through several changes of identity and revised mission statements since its beginnings as the *Haut comité pour la défense et de l’expansion de la langue française* in 1966.⁴ Indeed, one of the DGLFLF’s prior homogenizing incarnations (the DGLF), as mentioned above, was one of the bodies responsible for enacting the principles of the *loi Toubon*. This homogenizing focus began to shift in 2001, when the DGLF became the DGLFLF, “pour marquer la reconnaissance par l’État de la diversité linguistique de notre pays” <www.dglflf.culture.gouv.fr/publications/dglflf.pdf>. The new heterogenizing role of the DGLFLF is highlighted in Article 6 of a Nov. 2009 decree:

La mission des langues de France:

- contribue au développement et à la valorisation des langues de France;
- coordonne au sein du ministère chargé de la culture les travaux liés à la conservation, la constitution et la diffusion de corpus en français et en langues de France;
- assure l'observation des pratiques linguistiques, avec le concours des administrations et des milieux de la recherche compétents. (“Arrêté”)

An important step forward in the move toward heterogeneity is the DGLFLF's explicit recognition of which languages are to be considered “langues de France” (the closest political cognate to the term RML). Following Cerquiglini's 1999 report that listed 75 RMLs, over 100 languages were now to be recognized, including Breton, Basque, Catalan, Corsican, as well as Creoles and indigenous varieties spoken in French overseas territories, in addition to “non-territorial” languages spoken within France such as dialectal varieties of Arabic, Berber, Yiddish, or Romani.⁵ Indeed, two of the DGLFLF's five mission statements look beyond the French language, with the body aiming to “favoriser la diversité linguistique” (though this is more linked to the learning and usage of foreign languages than RMLs) and to “promouvoir et valoriser les langues de France.” However, while governmentally-approved statements to protect RMLs constitute an important symbolic move away from the traditional linguistic homogeneity that long characterized France, what real power does the DGLFLF have and how is the promotion of RMLs actually carried out?

Between 2002 and 2011, the DGLFLF published a bulletin (*Langues et cité*) on RMLs in France (a useful tool, since the census data provides no information). In its 2012 overview of activities, the DGLFLF stated that it had been engaged in collaborative dialogues not only with the French government at a regional level, but also with linguistic and cultural centers, with a view to improving the visibility of RMLs. Taking the example of Occitan, the DGLFLF spearheaded a coordination effort between the different local authorities where Occitan is spoken, which led to a framework document for the collectivization of Occitan language activities in fields such as publishing, theater, audiovisual production, and the digitization of heritage documents: <www.dglflf.culture.gouv.fr/publications/Bilan12.pdf>.

Again, such measures are a clear move against linguistic homogenization, but to what extent can it be argued that the situation for RMLs in France is improving? Oakes argues that it is France's recent shift toward traditional Republican values that now impedes progress for RMLs (75). As previously stated, there is an unwillingness to recognize that ratification of the Charter accords rights to languages, rather than to groups of people, which would contradict Article 1 of the Constitution: “La France est une République indivisible.” There is also an increased governmental unwillingness to enter into a debate on constitutional amendments. During the first

Assemblée nationale debate on RMLs (7 May 2008), any prospect of amendments that might mean a greater chance of ratification of the Charter were brushed aside by the Minister of Culture—“the Government does not wish to engage in the process of revising the Constitution in order to ratify the [...] Charter” (qtd. in Oakes 75)—preferring instead to call for a reference framework on the use of RMLs, which, it must be stressed, is yet to appear. Pessimism toward ratification was also voiced at a roundtable discussion on the future of RMLs (3 June 2014) at the *Assemblée nationale*, where Soucramanien—a member of the *Comité consultatif pour la promotion des langues régionales*—claimed that ratification would lead to incoherence within the Constitution (15). We might argue, then, that recent efforts to seek greater legitimacy for RMLs amount to little more than lip-service, for stumbling blocks on the path to ratification continue to emerge. Having given an overview of recent developments regarding RMLs, and the barriers that continue to impede full legitimacy, the discussion turns next to speakers on the ground, with a case study of a hitherto little-examined RML: Francoprovençal.

On Francoprovençal

Francoprovençal is the glottonym assigned by linguists to a RML spoken in parts of France, Switzerland, and Italy. Within France, the territory over which Francoprovençal is spoken stretches across the *départements* of the Loire, Rhône, Ain, Isère, Savoie, Haute-Savoie, parts of Jura and Franche-Comté, as well as in isolated parts of the Lyon metropolitan area—particularly the surrounding peri-urban regions of *les monts du Lyonnais* and in some small communes to the East of the city—and Geneva (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Francoprovençal-speaking zone



(taken from Bert, Costa, and Martin 14)

Francoprovençal as a dialect grouping is made up of a large number of disparate varieties with highly localized phonological, morpho-syntactic, and lexical forms. While there are recognized distinct internal groupings (e.g., Bressan, Dauphinois, Forézien, Lyonnais, and Savoyard in France; Valaisan, Vaudois, and Fribourgeois in Switzerland; Faetar and Valdôtain in Italy), some scholars have suggested that, in France at least, these delineated clusters form no real coherent internal boundaries for speakers themselves (Costa and Bert), who will most often only refer to their variety as *patois* in an entirely affectionate manner.

What is most striking about Francoprovençal is its recent introduction into the Romance linguistics literature: it was only recognized as a coherent and discrete linguistic unit at the turn of the twentieth century. The grouping “franco-provenzali” was first proposed by Ascoli in 1873 (published 1878), who sought to demarcate the southeastern varieties along the Gallo-Romance continuum that he saw as distinct from northern *oïl* French and the southern Occitan varieties. However, the parameters of Ascoli’s definition relied principally on just one linguistic feature: the raising or maintenance of Latin tonic free A when followed (or not) by a palatal consonant:

- (1) PRATUM > /'pre/ (Standard French), /'pra/ (Francoprovençal), where /a/ is maintained as either [a] or [ɔ] following a non-palatal consonant.
- (2) Where a palatal consonant is introduced, /a/ is raised to [i], e.g., for VACCAM, variants can include: ['vaka], ['bako] in Occitan varieties, but ['vaʃi], ['vaθi] in Francoprovençal.⁶

The corollary to demarcating such a vast territory with just one linguistic feature is that Francoprovençal has long been viewed as an illegitimately delimited linguistic unit.⁷ Since Ascoli, scholars have sought to redefine the Francoprovençal-speaking zone according to more robust linguistic criteria (Hasselrot 257–66). However, the notion “d’une unité francoprovençale nettement caractérisée et délimitée” (Gardette 141) has never truly been settled. These turbulent beginnings have negatively impacted language policy, and, accordingly, levels of vitality. For example, we might take as a typical indication of a language’s vitality the level of intergenerational mother-tongue transmission in a minority variety. For a region as vast as the Francoprovençal-speaking zone, it is striking that <1% of the total regional population (roughly 120,000) are reported to speak it, and mother-tongue transmission no longer takes place in much of the area in which it is spoken. Francoprovençal is classified by UNESCO as “severely endangered” (Salminen 247).

In terms of corpus planning,⁸ Francoprovençal has never known any real attempts at unification or standardization. As highly localized variation is often

the “obsessive interest” (Dorian 31) of the traditional native speaker, many individual phonetic spelling systems exist, with no formally codified or accepted standard. Further, there is no single prestige variety of Francoprovençal to select from, and, as a result, efforts at large-scale revitalization projects have been, and remain embryonic.

Regarding status planning, Francoprovençal has for some time been bound to varying levels of status between the states in which it is spoken. In the autonomous region of the Aosta Valley, Francoprovençal is protected under Federal law, and can be taught from primary school through to middle school, although it is not considered an official language (Josserand 112–13). Conversely, in France, Francoprovençal was only recognized by the *Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication* fifteen years ago as a *langue de France*, but it does not constitute one of the regional languages protected by law that are permitted in the education system. This context can be contrasted with Breton, which *Diwan* schools have used as a medium of education since the 1970s, following the *loi Deixonne*.

Owing to its turbulent beginnings, a rapidly declining speaker-base, a confusing glottonym (Kasstan, “Illustration”), and over a century of policies aimed at linguistic homogenization, it is not surprising that speakers themselves—who have never knowingly felt to be part of the same linguistic system (Tuailon, “Faut-il”)—see no future for the language. A 2010 study conducted by Kasstan among a sample of eighteen native speakers of Francoprovençal (12 male, 6 female) in *les monts du Lyonnais* revealed that while two-thirds of respondents were in favor of the inclusion of Francoprovençal into the school curriculum, none were prepared to state this should be mandatory. In this region, the acquisition of an RML is still viewed as a hindrance to social mobility, unlike the acquisition of an international language. When asked if Francoprovençal had a future in the region, 67% of the sample responded “no,” while 33% were not prepared to state either way (Figures 2 and 3).

Although the data should be taken as indicative only, given the number of speakers and the restriction of the sample universe to just the Lyonnais region, it is at least clear from this sample that (a) native speakers will only support more favorable language policies to a certain degree, and (b) that there is a clear discrepancy between the hopes and the expectations on behalf of these speakers for the language. This pattern is commonly reported in the language death literature, and is documented in the context of other RMLs spoken in France (Jones 63). In the Lyonnais region at least, it appears that the very limited State-level support for Francoprovençal has succeeded in advancing the tide of long-term language shift. While there is not yet any sign that this state of affairs will change dramatically at the national level, there are signs of change at the regional one.

Figure 2. Responses to “Est-ce qu’on devrait enseigner le patois à l’école?”
(adapted from Kasstan 25)

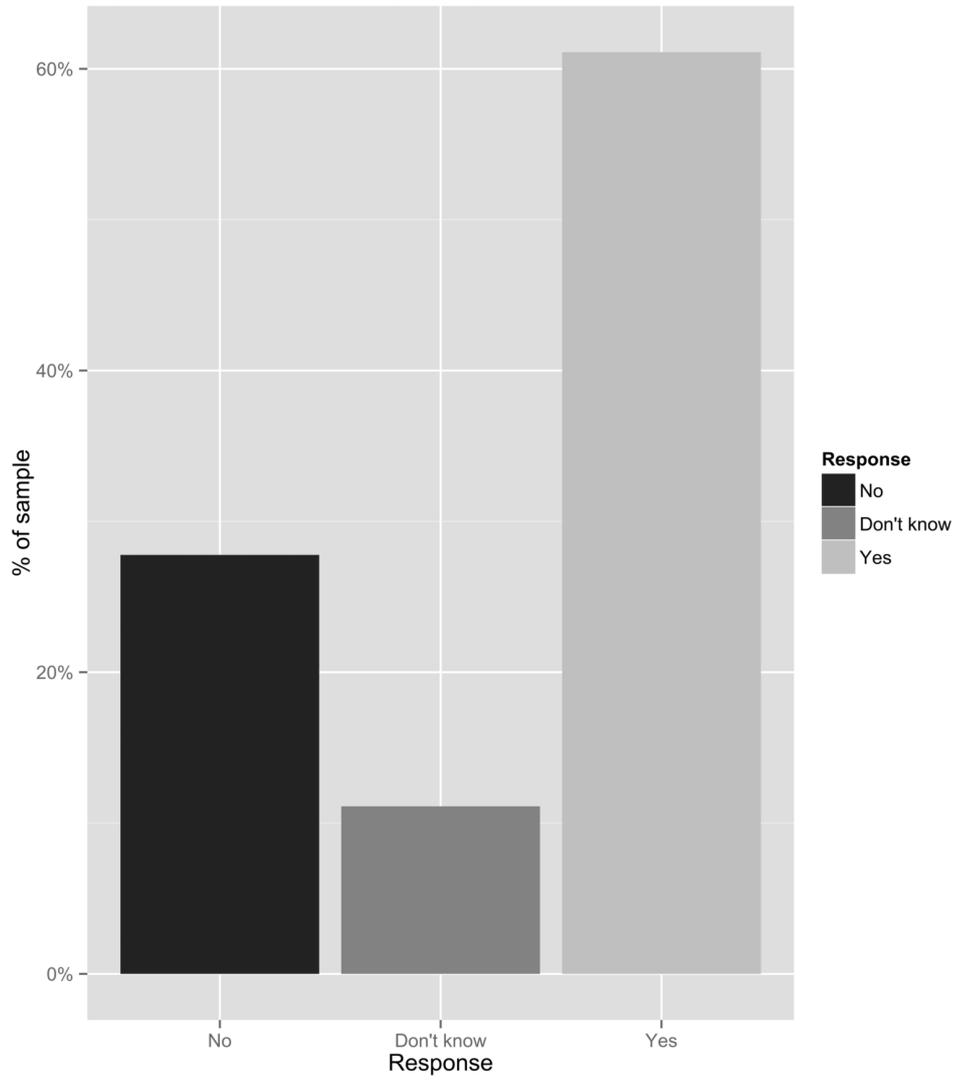
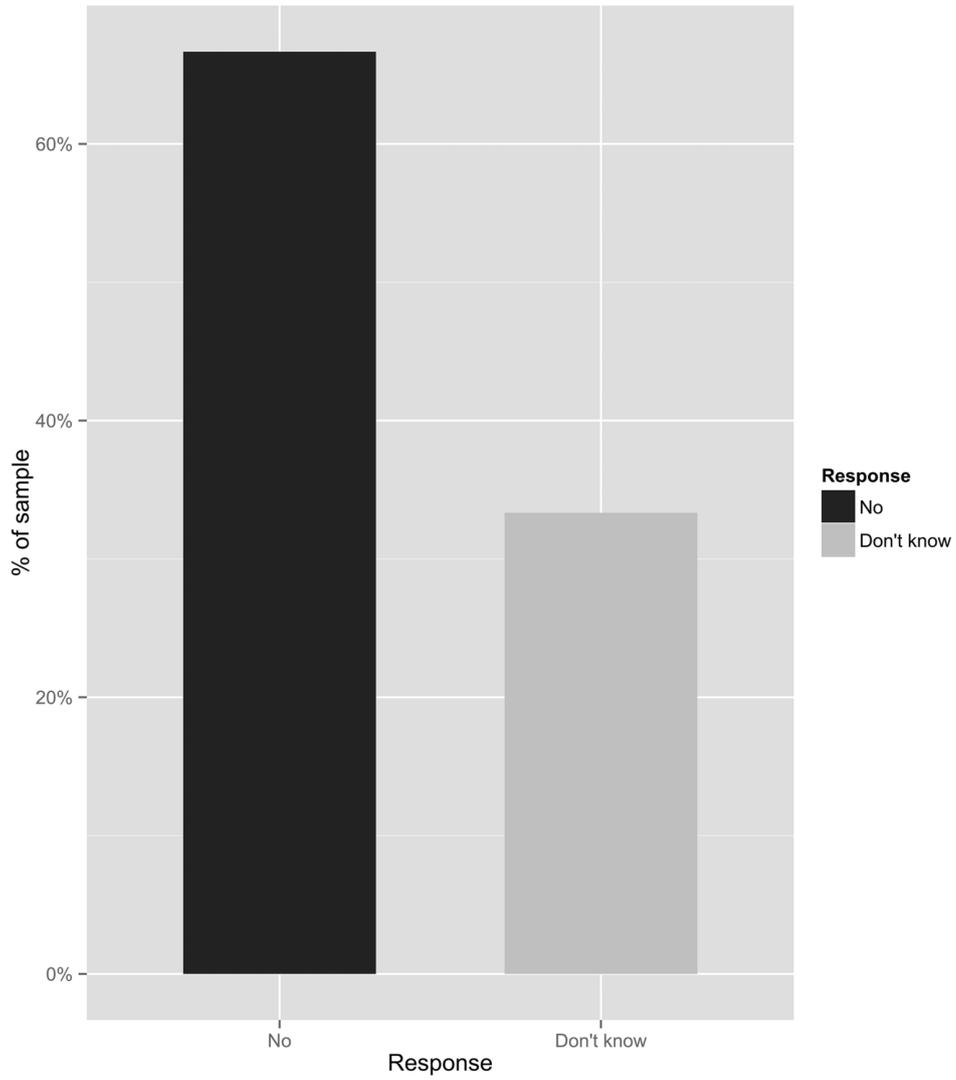


Figure 3. Responses to “Le patois a-t-il un avenir?”
(adapted from Kasstan 25–26)



The administrative region of Rhône-Alpes—the second largest metropolitan area behind Île-de-France—has been undergoing a steady change in perception of RMLs at an official level, where Francoprovençal has become recognized as valuable to locally elected politicians in the formation of a distinctive regional identity, that might better promote an ambiance of “linguistic closeness that would help legitimize its own existence as a coherent cultural area” (Costa and Bert). Such an approach to RMLs at a regional level is noteworthy, as this contradicts the generally held principle that “regional languages do not belong to the regions but rather the nation as a whole” (Oakes 79), i.e., in reference to “langues de France.” This changing dynamic in language policy began to take shape in 2007 when the Rhône-Alpes administration sought applications to evaluate the sociolinguistic situation of the RMLs spoken within its boundaries. Following a two-year survey undertaken by Bert, Costa, and Martin (FORA), the Rhône-Alpes regional council adopted measures that would seek wider recognition of the region’s RMLs, including greater provisions and the need for wider recognition.⁹ While Rhône-Alpes is not the first region to seek wider recognition and increased legitimacy for its RMLs (Bert and Martin 66), these steps might well be the first that seek—in an official capacity at least—to promote and provide for Francoprovençal as an RML of France. As the administrative region continues to adopt measures in line with the outcomes of FORA, it remains to be seen whether or not these changing tendencies will have any long-term positive impact on its levels of vitality. Broadly, Francoprovençal remains a largely understudied RML, certainly by comparison with other languages spoken in the region, and further research on these varieties is needed.

This article began with the exposition that France has, for over a century, solidified its foundations for a one-language-one-nation state. These homogenizing linguistic tendencies have impeded research on language policies vis-à-vis RMLs spoken within France, given the traditional intolerance that the State portrays toward RMLs, and regionalism in general. Conversely, a central aim of this article has been to demonstrate that, in spite of decades of policies that have sought to educate speakers of the need to abandon RMLs, evidence appears to signal that regional administrations are now open to the richness that RMLs can bring to the *patrimoine*, that regional governments might now view RMLs as a source of wealth for the promotion of a distinctive regional identity. The case of Francoprovençal has been invoked here as a potential example of such a scenario. Unlike the better-known RMLs spoken within the Hexagon, Francoprovençal has never had real legitimacy. While a speaker of Breton might claim to be a *Bretonnant*, a speaker of Francoprovençal will never claim to be *francoprovençaliste et fière de l’être*. However, with a recent push on behalf of the administration of Rhône-Alpes for wider recognition of RMLs spoken within its borders, the future looks brighter than it

once did. Like Francoprovençal, there are languages spoken within the Hexagon that continue to struggle for legitimacy and acceptance not simply vis-à-vis governmental institutions, but also among speakers themselves. However, as officials within the Rhône-Alpes administration now clambering to emphasize the importance of RMLs, one might say that France is now showing an *increased* tolerance, as regional offices maneuver toward a more heterogeneous linguistic stance.

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Notes

¹De Certeau, Julia, and Revel (9) list important decrees that enforced the sole use of the French language in Flemish-speaking territories (1684), Alsace (1685), Catalan-speaking Roussillon (1700), Lorraine (1748), and Corsica (1768).

²See the proceedings, *Colloque sur l'avenir des langues régionales: tables rondes du 3 juin 2014* <www.colettecapdevielle.fr/2014/actes-du-colloque-sur-les-langues-regionales-a-lassemblee-nationale>.

³For a more detailed analysis of the debate on the ratification of the Charter, see Judge (“Contemporary”; *Linguistic* 63–120); Oakes.

⁴The *Haut comité pour la défense et de l'expansion de la langue française* initially fulfilled a much more homogenizing role, promoting increased domains of function as well as updating the form (i.e., codification) of the French language (in terms of Haugen’s widely-used 1966 standardization model): <www.dglflf.culture.gouv.fr/publications/dglflf.pdf>.

⁵For the DGLFLF to consider a language as a “langue de France,” it must not be an official language (and thereby receive support) in any other state. For this reason, languages like Chinese or Portuguese are not taken into account, despite the fact that they are spoken in France.

⁶For details on allophonic variation between [a] and [ɔ], consonantal fronting, or raising of /a/ to [i] in feminine singular nouns as depicted in (1) and (2), see Kasstan, “Illustration”.

⁷For a summary of this debate, see Tuaille, *Le francoprovençal* 24–25.

⁸Following Kloss (81), this paper makes the distinction between corpus planning and status planning.

⁹For an overview, see Bert and Martin; Costa and Bert.

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