

LINGUISTIC POLITICS DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Rarely is the problem of the diversity of languages taken into account whenever population groups are formed into States. When the problem does come up, it is later, in a primarily political context which tries to find political solutions, such as we may presently see them in Canada or in Belgium for instance. These solutions are few and they deal with situations that may contain a host of nuances.

Certain countries have chosen a vehicular language while keeping their local languages: the common language in the USSR is the language of one of its republics. In Senegal it is French, which is of a totally foreign origin but has the advantage of avoiding the rivalry existing among the native languages, and it also has a place within the international community. Other countries have accepted as official languages the different languages spoken within its borders. Thus Switzerland is officially tri-lingual (French, German, Italian), giving legal status to what somewhere else may simply be an accepted fact. Many Alsatians speak three languages (Alsatian, French, German). As far as it concerns countries with a strong linguistic heterogeneity, whether

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it be their history or their size making for a centralizing policy, they have adopted, with the resulting neglect of all others, the language or the idiom of the region which was politically or culturally the dominant one at the time of their unification. Pekinese has been extended to all of China, Florentine to Italy, Hindi to India. Some original combinations can be found: in Israel Jewish immigrants who came from more than seventy different countries, have again taken up the nation's old cultural and religious language, which had been out of use for two thousand years, and have placed it on equal footing with Arabic spoken by the local population, while English is being used for international relations.

At the time of the Revolution, France falls into the third category. It is interesting to study the circumstances and the means used by an enterprise of linguistic unification which is sufficiently coherent and removed in time so that one may clearly distinguish the negative and the positive aspects and that one may perhaps draw from it some lessons that could apply today to similar situations.

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Let us examine, first of all, how the France of the Ancien Régime is suddenly confronted with the revolutionary political context. Then we shall trace the power politics through the official acts. And we shall analyze fairly closely the work and the ideas of the chief advocate of unification, namely Abbé Gregoire.

THE SITUATION AT THE BEGINNING OF THE REVOLUTION

We know how Latin brought to Gaul by the Roman occupation first replaced the Gaulois language and eventually became Roman (*lingua romana rustica*) which in turn split into two large dialectal families: those of a French type (*langue d'oïl*) in the North and those of a southern type (*langue d'oc*). A third group, Franco-Provençal, whose geographical confines were more limited, kept some traits which had been lost in the two other languages. The idiom spoken in the Ile de France region became dominant with the increase of royal power, both politically and territorially, while the regional dialects (Norman, Picard, Walloon, Lorrain

champenois, Comtois languedocien, Provençal ...) became slowly reduced to the state of "patois", even if certain among them, like Provençal or Gascon, had all the traits of a real language. The outlying areas speak autonomous languages, like Basque or Breton, or those related to the neighboring country, like Catalan, Corsican, Alsatian or Flemish.

This is how things are in France on the eve of the Revolution. Knowledge of Parisian French, the literary and administrative language, is indispensable to whoever wants to rise in society and have his place. The "patois", which can be classified into separate groups within which they are infinitely diversified, constitute the true language of the regions. The mass of the people, largely peasants, speak their "patois" and do not understand French. The linguistic terminology of the period makes no distinctions within the kingdom between a foreign language, a spoken language, a dialect... Whatever is not French is given the name of "patois".

The Revolution thus finds itself facing a "mass of patois", in the largest sense of the term, and it includes most of the country. The closed character of the provinces, the difficulty of means of communication and the lack of intermingling among the population are all responsible for this condition. Even if, from the 17th century on, the classical language has liberated and refined itself, the country's linguistic structures have varied little since the Middle Ages when several "French" languages coexisted without a problem and were not always understood from one region to another.

But the reforming zeal of the revolutionaries is inspired not by linguistic considerations as much as by political exigencies, when, on August 13, 1790, Abbé Grégoire publishes the text of his inquiry. Ever since June 17, 1789, when the States General, originally assembled in Versailles, moved to Paris and assumed the name of National Assembly, from that moment egalitarianism, rationalization and uniformization are the order of the day. Privileges have been abolished, the Declaration of the Rights of Man has been published, the former provinces have been divided into 83 departments. The old framework, based on custom and arbitrariness, must be replaced by the new system of order and justice which is being elaborated. It is therefore

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equally logical that the language which is to spread these ideas must be unified. French, which is then at the height of its prestige, the language of the capital and of the whole of civilized Europe, must become the language of the Revolution.

Furthermore a sense of a new origin is developing and is being widely expressed, namely that of belonging to a Nation. It is undoubtedly tied to the decline or the change of the monarchic idea.

“Natio” originally referred simply to the birth place or people from which one came. D’Argenson, in 1754, notes with surprise in his Diary that the usage of the words “State” and “Nation” is spreading. During the reign of Louis XIV these two nouns were never mentioned and their meaning was totally unknown. A national identity does not exist under the Ancien Régime: one changes suzerainty and Lorraine has no customs agreements with the Rhenish countries although it has them with its French neighbors, the result being that it is easier to do commerce for Nancy with Mayence than with Rheims. One may remember Mirabeau’s saying that “France is a non-constituted agregation of disunited people” which indicates in its critical evaluation the movement toward a new state of mind.

The unifying factor represented by the close attachment to the king will become more and more unacceptable when Louis XVI’s mistakes will have discredited and eventually destroyed the image of the King as the symbol of the country. The Assembly calls itself National; at Valmy French troupes face the enemy with shouts of “vive la Nation!” The concrete concept of the kingdom has been replaced by the idea of an abstract collectivity, born of a common historical and cultural heritage. The Nation’s unification is achieved by means of a national language.

THE POLITICAL STRATEGY OF THE REVOLUTION

The blending of certain linguistic data and a political context will provide a better understanding of the revolutionary power’s reactions such as they may be seen in the official decisions.

The Ancien Régime had no need of a linguistic policy. The variety of the “patois” and of the “nations” did not affect the underlying feudal ties of the country. The power speaks French

and it cares little about the fact that the mass of the populace continues to speak the local language as long as an elite, acting as its agent, giving up its cultural separatism, understands French. This also explains why there was no educational policy, since it was not needed. The French learned their language, just as the Gauls had learned Latin, without any administrative constraint, for reasons that were chiefly social and economic.

The Revolution thus inherits this situation, which, although not adapted to the new conditions, must nevertheless be accepted at this first stage which concerns itself with the liberation of the people. Indeed one of the first decisions applies to the translation of the decrees into all the local languages and parlances, on January 14, 1790. This measure is applied right away and as an example one can see Dugas' enterprises take charge of thirty departments (more than a third of the country) and they function with an almost industrial output. At the same time certain ideas about education are taking shape, but they will take effect only after the Thermidor decisions.

This initial liberal attitude will be totally reversed for reasons that are independent of the linguistic problem as such. From 1793 on, the federalist tendency has been wiped out by Jacobin centralists. The "one indivisible" Republic has replaced the King. But, more importantly, since the Spring of 1793, Vendée, Corsica, several large towns like Lyons, Toulon and Marseilles, all in all close to sixty departments, are revolting against the Convention. All the borders are endangered by the enemy. Local languages are considered as supporting the counter-revolution.

The report by Barbère on the 8th Pluviôse An II (February 1794) indicates a decisive shift: "Federalism and counter-revolution speak low Breton; the emigrants and the enemies of the Republic speak German; the counter-revolution speaks Italian and fanaticism speaks Basque." Barère proposes in the accompanying decree that teachers be sent at once to these "four corners of the Republic's territory" (Brittany, Alsace, Corsica, the Basque country) where a firmly rooted local idiom has been identified and associated, often quite rightly, with the reactionary forces. It is a public safety measure, like sending representatives on a mission, and if this measure cannot be applied to the whole of the territory as certain deputies—Abbé Grégoire among them—

would have wished, it is only due to reasons of efficiency: "The overall measure would require so much time and so many men that we cannot accomplish the task set before us as soon as we would wish. What we need most urgently today, is to prevent a new Vendée from forming in present-day Brittany where (...) the priests are exercising a most cruel influence by speaking only low Breton..." Barère also refuses to attack the patois—one can see that he, for one, makes the distinction—because they "are not exclusive" and "have not prevented anyone from knowing the national language". The adopted decree will be completed and enlarged by the one passed on the 2nd Thermidor which forbids the usage of any idiom except French in any act whatever, even under a private seal. This measure has a Terrorist taint to it and is difficult to enforce; it will be abrogated at the end of the Terror, a month and a half later, on the 16th Fructidor.

The liberal attitude of 1790 was actually in contradiction to the *uniformisation* tendency and it will, in any case, disappear under the pressure of the circumstances in connection with the Barère report and decree where for the first time a political strategy dealing with language and education is logically put forth.

THE WORK AND THE ACTION OF ABBÉ GRÉGOIRE

Abbé Grégoire's work, on the other hand, does not undergo any change. From the very beginning it shows itself to be the natural and consistent application of the spirit of Enlightenment at the time when the official policy had not yet become hardened.

As the curé of Embermesnil in Lorraine, Grégoire was sent as a deputy of the clergy to the States General before becoming the symbol of the patriotic village priest. The problems of language and of teaching are nothing new to him. In his parish he built up a library of good books to counteract the pernicious effects of the farmers' almanacs on the peasants. He knows pastor Oberlin, brother of the author of an *Essai sur les patois lorrains dans les environs du Ban de la Roche...*, himself a founder of schools, builder of roads, creator of industries. Above all he has written an *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs* which was crowned by a prize given in 1788 by the

Société royale des Sciences et des Arts of Metz. In that document he states, among other things, the necessity of eradicating “that kind of Germano-Hebraic-rabbinical jargon which is used by German Jews”. Undoubtedly he refers to the flavorful Judeo-Alsatian or perhaps to Yiddish about whose rich heritage in folklore and in literature we know. Grégoire also writes: “Governments ignore or are insensitive to the need of eliminating the patois in order to further the cause of the Enlightenment, the purified knowledge of religion, the easy execution of laws, national happiness and political tranquillity.” Here we see, brought together and clearly stated, all the cultural, religious and political motivations which will inspire Grégoire’s questionnaire and subsequent report.

The inquiry is now launched and the text is distributed in all of France on August 13, 1790. On August 23rd it also appears in Brissot’s *Le Patriote français* whose circulation is estimated at 100,000 copies. This is the heyday of the Revolution, a month after the “Fête de la Fédération”, the time of the translation of the decrees. Until June 12, 1792, forty-nine answers from the provinces will arrive, and they will be acted upon two years later, that is to say some four years after the start of the inquiry, in the report to be delivered by “Bishop Grégoire” in front of the Convention of the 16 Prairial, An II (June 1794). The circumstances and the political atmosphere are profoundly altered, since six days later starts what has been called “the Great Terror” with the enactment of a law that suppresses pleadings and the testimony of witnesses before the Revolutionary Tribunal. “Heads fall like rooftiles”. The report is actually quite in keeping with the terrorist inspiration, but it will have no effect at all. The linguistic terror runs a perfect parallel to the political terror with its reasons and its means in a common struggle to save the Revolution by defending it against the same enemies.

Before we analyze the questionnaire, a remarkable document of primary importance, we shall give its complete text. Then we shall briefly comment on the significance of the answers and we shall conclude with a reading of the Report.

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The Questionnaire

1. Is the usage of the French language universal in your area? Are one or more patois spoken there?
2. Does this patois have an old recognized origin?
3. Does it contain many indigenous terms, many composite words?
4. Does one encounter words derived from the Celtic, from the Greek, from Latin, and in general from ancient and modern languages?
5. Does it have a marked affinity with French, with the dialect of neighboring areas, with that of certain distant places where emigrants, who came from your area as colonizers, had gone to settle long ago?
6. In what way does it differ most from the national language? Is it not especially the case with the names of plants, of diseases, the terms used in art and in the trades, in farming tools, in the different types of grain, in commerce and in custom law? We should like to obtain this nomenclature.
7. Does one often find several words to designate the same thing?
8. For what sort of things, of occupations, of passions is this patois the richest?
9. Are there many words to express nuances of ideas and of intellectual objects?
10. Are there many terms offensive to good taste? What is to be inferred concerning the purity or the corruption of mores?
11. Are there many swearwords and expressions associated with great anger?
12. Does this patois contain terms or locutions that are full of force and that may be absent in the French idiom?
13. Are the final sounds more commonly vowels than consonants?
14. What type of pronunciation is there? Is it guttural, sibilant, soft, little or strongly accented?
15. In the writing of this patois, are there traits or letters that are different from French?
16. Does this patois vary a great deal from village to village?
17. Is it spoken in the towns?
18. How large is the area where this patois is spoken?
19. Do the country people have the ability of speaking French too?
20. Were sermons formerly preached in patois? Has this usage stopped?
21. Are grammars and dictionaries of this dialect extant?
22. Are there writings in patois in the churches, in the cemeteries, on public squares?

23. Have you works or manuscripts published in patois, ancient or modern, like customs law, public notices, chronicles, prayers, sermons, books of morals, songs, hymns, almanacs, poetry, translations, etc.?
24. What merit do these varied works have?
25. Could they be easily procured?
26. Are there many proverbs in patois that are peculiar to your dialect and to your area?
27. What influence does the patois have on your morals and how are these morals reflected in your dialect?
28. Is it noticeable that your patois is slowly approaching the French idiom, that certain words are disappearing and since when?
29. What would be the religious and political impact if the patois were to be entirely eradicated?
30. How could that be done?
31. In the country schools, is the teaching done in French? Are the same books being used?
32. Does each village have male and female schoolteachers?
33. In addition to the art of reading, writing, arithmetic and catechism, are other subjects taught in these schools?
34. Are the schools strictly supervised by the village priests and vicars?
35. Do they have a selection of books they can lend their parishioners?
36. Do the country folk have a taste for reading?
37. What kinds of books are usually found in their homes?
38. Do they have many prejudices and of what sort?
39. Have they become more enlightened during the past twenty years? Have their morals become more depraved? Have their religious principles not been weakened?
40. What are the causes and what remedies might there be for these ills?
41. What are the moral effects produced by the present revolution?
42. Do you find the people patriotic or only interested in their own profit?
43. Are the clergy and the former aristocrats victims of crude insults, of the peasants' vile manners and of the despotic behavior exercised by mayors and the municipalities?

The logic of these 43 questions may not be immediately apparent, but a careful examination will quickly show the coherence of this complex and carefully worked out document.

The logical center of the questionnaire, after which it follows

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two converging planes, is to be found in questions 29 and 30: "What would be the religious and political impact if the patois were to be entirely eradicated?" and "How could this be achieved?" When the end purpose is stated, it is quite unequivocal. The people in the provinces are called upon by Grégoire, who represents the central power, to give their opinion about their own linguistic and cultural suicide and, should the case arise, contribute to it. In any case, the intention is clearly understood and only very few will answer in the manner of the "Amis de la Constitution d'Auch", ready to "sacrifice themselves on the altar of the Fatherland" as they borrow this sense from History: "We see not the slightest inconvenience in the destruction of our patois.... We take no stock in our patois; one can take it away from us whenever one wants to: we shall not bat an eyelid... The eradication of our patois can but be pleasing to God, we shall welcome it and politics will not be the loser for it."

Most often, the respondents find refuge in reservations and in doubts concerning the possibility of carrying the task out. "I do not think it would be a matter of concern to destroy the Gascon (dialect) in our cantons; but the manner in which it can be done seems unfeasible and hardly useful to me, since the lower classes in the town and the country people will always corrupt the language and make a jargon out of it." (Pierre Bernadau, Guyenne). Some persons defend the patois quite openly: "The patois brings men closer together, it unites them, it is a language among brothers and friends." (Bergerac) Some attack Grégoire's ideas openly: "In a word, I am convinced that if one were to suppress instruction in Flemish, it would not only be harmful to the public weal, but, more importantly, it would be an obstacle to all sense of happiness." The most beautiful answer comes from Perpignan: "To destroy it (the patois), one would have to destroy the sunshine, the coolness of the nights, the kind of food we eat, the quality of our water, mankind all together." An almost prophetic phrase!

Starting with these two central questions, the text goes off in two directions, namely questions 1 - 28 and 31 - 43.

The first group combines philology, semantics and sociology

and constitutes thus a rather methodical descriptive essay of the patois.

First of all they are placed in a linguistic and historical context with respect to the national language and the languages of the adjoining countries. The question, basic at that time, is asked about the language's origin: is this origin old and well-known? One also tries to find out about the patois' home territory. What sort of words constitute its make-up? Are the terms indigenous, composite, borrowed from neighboring languages which are more or less different from those that helped make up the French language? At the same time that one wants to know about the purity of race, one also inquires about the degree of parenthood: affinity or distance (5-6). The problem concerns the measuring of a distance, and should this distance be too great it would justify eradication because of heterogeneity; if, on the other hand, the distance is too short, it could justify eradication because of bastardization and uselessness. One can see that it all leads to the same result, previously established. Furthermore the questions do not even bother to look objective. They are directed, both in their details and in their tone, as an interrogation would be which attempts to elicit some precise information: "Isn't it especially for...?"

Questions 7 to 12 inquire after the means of expression: What do these patois reveal? What do they bring to the surface? Are they necessary and honest things? To what extent? If it should occur that this patois contains too many expressions which the proper (moral) usage rejects, "terms contrary to decency, swear-words" (10-11), what a lucky break since it would be one more reason for destroying it! If there were a scarcity of words considered important "to express the nuances of ideas and intellectual concepts" (9), or, on the other hand, if there should be excessive redundancy or an overabundance of synonyms (7), those facts would constitute proof of inefficiency and uselessness. And finally, perhaps (12) there may be a few pearls in this dungheap, some interesting terms "and even some that can't be found in the French idiom", so let us save what is salvageable and sacrifice the rest, thus feeling better about it.

The final panel of the description (13-28): after locating the origin, distinguishing the affinities, probing the means of ex-

pression, one asks questions about the appearance, the manner, the extent of the oral and written transmission of the patois, its relationship to French. It is now a matter of defining the geographic zones (town, village, country-side, territory), the areas of usage (religion, laws, leisure...), the extent of its diffusion ("printed works or manuscripts, ancient or modern"). One draws up plans for possibly constituting a museological corpus. After the triumph of "the language", it will be interesting and without danger to study the relics, to do archeological research amidst the ruins.

Questions 27 and 28 achieve the transition towards two vital queries: What is the patois' influence on the mores and vice-versa? Has there not been a noticeable weakening of the patois which could simply be accelerated and since when?

Once the purpose of the inquiry is clear (29-30), questions 31-43 endeavor to single out the means and the conditions for achieving the results. The linguistic analysis is followed by a pedagogical analysis, then a political and moral one which in turn points to the elaboration of an educational policy. The organization and development of public instruction are obviously essential factors for the unification of the language.

These questions are divided into two separate groups.

The first (31-37) develops the examination of the means (30) made up by the school (31-34) and by reading material (35-37), both under the surveillance of "MM. les curés et vicaires", whose vigilance is taken into account. Grégoire here opens the breach for compulsory free elementary education, which the Montagnards had clamored for and which the Thermidorians gave up. The law of Lakanal (25 October 1795) will organize Secondary and Higher education, but will do no more than provide for the creation of one or two paying schools in each canton.

"Is the teaching being done in French? Are the same books being used?" (31) The living but incoherent diversity of the regional languages and their own irreducible genius must give way to a strictly controlled uniformity which has marked French education down to our day. One may remember a certain minister during the Third Republic who, looking at his watch,

bragged about knowing which page was being studied at that very moment by all the schoolchildren in the country.

The answers provide an idea as to the smiles provoked by the questions dealing with the frequency and the taste for reading among the peasants, about the books that they may own or find in their country-priest's library. "I know the state of the diocese well enough to be able to affirm that the libraries of our priests contain no more than the four volumes of the *Bréviaire*, the *Parfait Cuisinier*, the *Ordonnances synodales*, the *Théologie* of Collet or Habert, the *Council of Trent*, Jesuitic *Meditations* and *Sermons*, the *Code des curés sur les dimes*, etc." This particular inventory is one of the largest. The peasants, tired out by their labors and lacking any sort of leisure, have little or no time to read anything except the farmer's almanacs, which is a bastion for "prejudicial notions". "The teaching in the country districts is of a very low level." As far as the country-priest is concerned, he "claimed that if one instills in the children the taste for reading, it meant that one tried to give them a sense of superiority vis-à-vis their fellows and that this was inimical to Christian modesty. Girls who read make for bad women." (Pierre Bernadau, Guyenne).

The second group of questions (38-43) constitutes a poll about the progress of the Enlightenment in the country-side. The overall result is pretty devastating.

A "farmer" of Montauban writes about the peasants and says that their understanding of what has happened is so limited that they are willing to be killed for the Constitution—a magical word for them—solely because they believe that they are thus defending the cause of the King. Everyone admits that the peasants are full of "prejudicial notions" of all sorts, and that in most cases, with or without a revolution, the mores have not improved at all, far from it. "One notices that the peasants who know how to speak French are generally less crude in their conversation, but they are inclined to be more libertine and less virtuous... In general the peasant holds on to superstitions and prejudices of all kinds... For the last twenty or thirty years their mores have become surprisingly corrupt. The quest for personal gain is the only means for determining the actions of the people and of the countryside inhabitants. The new Constitution matters

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to them only on account of the profits they have drawn from it and the additional benefits they still expect to reap... They are quite willing to sell themselves a fourth time to the first ones ready to start a counter-revolution." (Morel the elder, procurator in Lyons).

This indictment is surely very harsh, but it reflects fairly accurately the general tone. The usage of French, linked to the proximity and the visitation of towns, does not do the peasants any good at all.

A DIALOGUE THAT FAILED

In gathering together a vast documentation, the Inquiry started a dialogue which could have been extremely profitable but which unfortunately does not achieve its purpose.

The overwhelming majority of the correspondents is made up of "clerics" in the largest sense of the term (legal clerks, doctors, professors, members of the clergy and the Public Administration), among whom there are many supporters of the Sociétés des Amis de la Constitution. Out of 49 answers, 36 follow the proposed outline and 17 (over a third) come from the South of France. The entire body of these texts is spread out over three collections kept by the Bibliothèque de la Société de Port-Royal and by the Bibliothèque Nationale. One part of it was published in 1880 by Augustin Gazier; other parts have been included as an appendix to the book by M. de Certeau, D. Julia and J. Revel called *Une politique de la langue: La Révolution et les patois* (Gallimard, 1975). This is a work of the greatest interest and it is useful to refer to it if one wants to study the question in greater depth.

The sociological and cultural background of the authors might have facilitated communication, but there were some obstacles.

Still today, the differences separating Paris from "la Province" often approach antagonism. At that time already, the capital, as an administrative and cultural center, has the tendency of imposing its spirit and its influence on the rest of the nation. Whether it is the focal point of oppression or the nucleus of revolts that are often misunderstood, Paris nevertheless incarnates successively the centralism of every regime, imposing an

image to Frenchmen wherein they do not recognize themselves. The Province has multiple facets, it lives at another pace and with other principles and it expresses it all through the variety of its "patois". The enterprise trying to unify the language, as Grégoire would wish it, is, from this viewpoint, a typically "Parisian" idea.

Let us point out, first of all, that the notion is based on a doubtful definition of the very terms of *langage* and *patois*, which remains fairly general at the time since we find it in the *Encyclopédie* where the patois is defined as "a corrupted language which is spoken in almost all the provinces... The (real) language is only spoken in the capital." A rectification comes from the provinces: "The natural language of our region is Flemish... If you understand by the word 'patois' (which is the only one you use) any idiom different from French... If, on the other hand, by the word 'patois' you only mean a dialect stemming from pure French..." (Amis de la Constitution de Bergues).

It never seems to have dawned on Grégoire that the Revolution was not necessarily incompatible with linguistic particularism. And yet in Alsace where French is not spoken, the new ideas are accepted enthusiastically. "Is it French or German writers who have taught the Alsatian people to love the new Constitution? ... I see no reason why the German language and attachment to the Constitution cannot go hand in hand ... So far (the Alsatians) have been led by a sort of magic charm to adopt the new Constitution. Beware of using means other than those of persuasion..." (Speech given in the German language section of the Amis de la Constitution de Strasbourg, on July 6, 1790).

Even in so far as the true patois are concerned, Grégoire clearly listens only to those who, like him, consider them a sort of "underlanguage" of obscure origin, unstable and without written foundation, a soil favoring "prejudice" and obscurantism. Used as a key word during this period, prejudice refers to all sorts of phenomena that range from custom to witchcraft, including such diverse items as meteorological observations, medical or magic practices, superstitions ... He pays no attention to texts like the one we have quoted which defend the patois by showing its true value and its deep roots. There is here either

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a misunderstanding or actually a discourse among the deaf. The inquiry, after starting out looking for information, tends to become an inquisition. Grégoire's work reflects the ambiguity of revolutionary action which "liberates" the people from those things which they understood and which they cared for in order to impose others on them which they do not want and which they do not understand.

Let us now look at the end result of the Inquiry as seen in the Report presented to the Convention about "the need and the means to abolish the patois and to universalize the French language."

THE REPORT OF THE 16 PRAIRIAL AN II

The title is explicit enough and does not warrant any comments. By comparison, the report of Barère is moderate and we are a long way from a mere translation of the decrees. In a fairly long paragraph Grégoire points out the disadvantages of such an endeavor: "Would you suggest that we counteract this ignorance by translations? You would then multiply the expenses and by complicating the political process you would halt its progress. Let us add that most vulgar dialects resist translation or would only provide inaccurate ones."

The report starts with a census of the patois and a reasoned description of the linguistic state in the countryside. Grégoire estimates "at about thirty" the number of patois and at about six million the number of Frenchmen who do not speak the national language, while "about the same number are just about incapable of holding a sustained conversation; a final figure indicates that those who speak French are not more than three million, and probably those who write it correctly are even fewer... There are only about fifteen departments where the French language is spoken exclusively." With French being spoken in all of Europe, this situation seems scandalous to Grégoire, especially since he identifies without nuance The Revolution with the unification of the language.

The piece-meal character of the patois is described as a survival from feudal times when "the tyrants" felt it was to their advantage that the people not understand one another. A free

people must have a direct knowledge of the laws and must communicate without hindrances. The French people "must proudly consecrate as soon as possible, in a Republic, one and indivisible, the unique and invariable usage of the language of liberty." One and the other will thus be imposed by all available means. This does not prevent Grégoire from asserting that "language legislation has always been democratic" and he cites the example of "a tyrant of Rome" who tried meddling with language. Let us not forget that at this time revolutionary fanaticism has replaced other fanaticisms and that democracy is temporarily conceived as an ideal which is brought about by the Terror. The effect that such a policy had upon the provinces can be understood if we compare these statements to the following passage taken from the Alsatian's speech quoted earlier: "The only motive that may excuse such total domination by the French language can perhaps be found in the system based upon the necessity of having a uniform language, which is as bizarre as the system that believes this uniformity to be necessary in matters of religion."

The advantages of linguistic unification are enumerated and analyzed. By and large they address themselves to the problems raised by some correspondents: political (consolidating the country, especially near the borders); social (the disappearance of prejudices); economic (the speeding up of the diffusion of technical progress and the uniformization of nomenclature). Some objections are cursorily examined: "Do you think, I have been asked, that southern Frenchmen will easily give up a language which is dear to them out of habit and sentiment?" The answer is a simple one: first of all, their language will not be lost, it will constitute the object of a study! and besides their culture is so vastly inferior to the one which is offered in exchange! As far as the lowering of moral standards is concerned, which was sometimes heralded as a consequence of switching to French, that was indeed a problem under the Ancien Régime, infected with luxury and parasitism. The austerity of republican morals has removed this danger.

Once he has established that "the unity of the idiom is an integrating part of the Revolution", Grégoire shows that this goal is not unreachable and that great progress has been made

in this direction for some time already, thanks to the elimination of feudality and thanks to the reform of the judicial system and the intermingling of people brought about by the army. In each case, the upheaval or the destruction of the old structures eliminates or reforms the language to which they were bound and creates room for the new language.

For the sake of accelerating this evolution, some measures are proposed: among them is the mobilization of "this small number of writers whose talents are enhanced by their republicanism." They will be asked to write some pamphlets—large volumes being hard to digest, and unread—about meteorology "with direct application to agriculture", or elementary physics, to fight against the "prejudices". Journalists who "exercise a sort of opinion control are invited to give more space to moral aspects". The press is carefully placed in the front rank of the battle to create an official literature in the official language, but it applies to poets as well since they shall write songs and lyric poems because "historical and didactic songs that have the sentimental cadence of the narrative romance, hold a special charm for country folk."

The exclusive usage of the national language will be demanded in public spectacles, in municipal deliberations and on the merchant's signs. In the name of morality all borrowings from dialects will be eradicated. "Moral standards! without them there is no Republic, and without a Republic there are no moral standards." And finally, "most of the old and modern legislators have wrongfully considered marriage only from the viewpoint of reproduction of the species... Why should future husbands not have to prove that they know how to read, write and speak the national language?"...

Even when he feels that he is being somewhat of an extremist, Grégoire, sustained by his exterminating zeal and the consciousness of being in the right, does not give in: "I believe that it is easy to turn these views to ridicule: but it is more difficult to show that they are not reasonable. As if terror were suddenly to fear being ridiculous! The accents from the different regions can still be heard every day at the National Convention, "they will hold out a little longer", but they, too, must disappear. A certain language may be spoken the same way in totally distinct

areas, while in the same country the same language is pronounced in different ways. The accent is therefore no more resistant to reform than words are."

In conclusion, Grégoire presents "the outline of a project...: to revolutionize our language." It concerns basically the mission which the Monarchy had conferred upon the existing Académie Française... to bring spelling up to date. "It is possible to make useful corrections in orthography." People are still saying it! Get some order into the language: "Whosoever has read Vaugelas... must be convinced that our language is full of equivocal expressions and uncertainties: it would be both useful and easy to settle these problems." It is interesting to compare this admission—although perfidy is an English specialty and they went so far as to borrow the word from us (see the end of the report)—to another passage which says that "in its clear and methodical advantage (this refers to French) all thought is easily developed." Finally a dictionary and a grammar must be established. The former will assure the clarification, the enrichment, the "perfecting" of the "idiom" within the rules that have made for its excellence. "Without giving in to the excesses of ridiculous neologisms" the dictionary will not hesitate, just as it is done in other languages, to borrow from them what is best and what is missing in French. The grammar will help to eliminate "all the anomalies resulting either from irregular and defective verbs or from exception to the general rule" and will thus impose a democratic leveling of the language which is a benefit bestowed upon society by the Revolution.

Such as it is, mingling judicious measures with ridiculous systematizations, Grégoire's Report is at the same time an interesting and a disquieting text. While it places under the aegis of a rigid nationalism a good conscience and a sort of logic, both quite insensitive to their own contradictions and their injustice, yet it gives a rather faithful idea of the linguistic policy that was prevalent in France after the Revolution, showing its principles, its justifications and its means,

How is one then to judge the work of the Revolutionaries and, particularly, the work of Grégoire? It was the first time that a linguistic policy was applied to the country and it led to

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a development and an organization in education which was without a precedent, a fact that cannot be minimized.

This policy itself was rather a failure. Taking care of urgent needs, it may at the time have prevented a linguistic explosion which may not necessarily have occurred. In any case, the policy's harshness created much rancor and failed nevertheless in eradicating the patois, still spoken in many places. As far as the local languages are concerned, despite all the repressions against them, they are in full resurgence precisely in those regions where one tried hardest to uproot them.

The basic mistake was not the wish for a single language, to be understood and known by everyone, but the fact of ignoring or underestimating the existence of underlying autonomous cultures and to have tried eliminating them by reducing them to caricatures. This is without a doubt the most lucid lesson which can be drawn from the revolutionary experiment in the fields of language.