

# The Occitan Language: A Struggle To Survive

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## Introduction

This paper discusses the current state of the Occitan language, one of several minority languages spoken in France today. An overview of the history of the language will illustrate how much linguistic territory the language has lost up to the present. Descriptions of the current contracted geographical distribution of Occitan, its diminished presence in the educational system, and its lack of legal status will further underscore the language's decline. The grammatical, lexical and phonetic features of the various dialects of Occitan will be compared and contrasted with French to show that Occitan is, in fact, a separate language.

## Languages of France

Though French is the official language of France, there are many other languages spoken in France today. Breton is spoken in the north-west in the area known as Brittany, Basque in the south-west mainly in the Pyrenees-Atlantiques on the Spanish border, Catalan in the south-east in the Pyrenees-Orientales bordering the Catalan speaking area of Spain, Flemish in the north-east in French Westhoek near the Belgium border, Alsatian in the west on the German border in Alsace and parts of Moselle, Corsican on the island of Corsica in the Mediterranean, Franco-Provençal in the south-east near the Swiss and Italian borders, Luxembourgish in Moselle bordering Luxembourg, Picard on the Belgian border in the north-east, Ligurian in the south-east near the Italian border, Caló in the south, and Occitan, the subject of this paper, in the south. With the exception of Breton, all of these languages are spoken across borders. Every one of these languages is in a precarious position with only limited transference to the younger generations. In fact, a majority of the speakers of these languages are found in the 50 years of age and above bracket. The language groups with the largest number of active

speakers are Occitan with 1,500,000 and Breton with more than 500,000. The other languages have far fewer with Calo the fewest at 10,000. Three languages have already become extinct, Shuadi, Greek (Corsica) and Zarphatic. Shuadi ceased to be spoken in 1977, Greek in 1982, and Zarphatic much earlier according to Ethnologue France.<sup>1</sup>

## Occitan

Occitan is a Romance language belonging to the same branch of the Italic Language group as Catalan, Romanian and Italian. The Catalan language is the closest to Occitan and there are some linguists who claim that it is in fact a dialect of Catalan, not a separate language. For purposes of this paper, they will be treated as separate. Mercator states that work to standardize the language started at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was based on the Languedoc dialect.<sup>2</sup> The French government, even on the rare occasion when it acknowledges the existence of Occitan, refers to it as a dialect of French or a distorted form of French, a patois. This attitude has been spread by French institutions, foremost among them the education system. This is far from the truth as both languages formed independently out of Latin. In fact, Occitan stayed closer to Latin than French did. One may then even suggest that French is a distorted version of Occitan. Corre states that in "*Brief Discussion of the Occition Language*" that "even a cursory glance will assure the reader that the language is substantially different from standard French".<sup>3</sup> As the Occitan speaking areas have no politico-geographical existence, and therefore remain invisible, this attitude is unchanging. This state of affairs exists in spite of Occitan's long literary history dating back to the Troubadours.

## History

The history of the Occitan language can be divided into four periods. This will help to give a clearer picture of the language's history. The first period is up to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the second is from the 15<sup>th</sup> century until the revolution, the third is from the revolution to World War Two, and the fourth is from the war up until the present day.

Up until the 15<sup>th</sup> century Occitan was the language used throughout the region known as Occitania in literature, law and administration, and community. The population residing in Occitania at this time, from the royal courts down to the peasants, used the language extensively. It was used in all facets of life; the home, the fields, commerce, music and the law courts. The Troubadours were largely responsible for elevating the language to the level of literary standing that it had at the time. They were lyric poets or poet-musicians based in the south of France in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the 13<sup>th</sup> century who wrote in Occitan. The Troubadours appear to have originated in Poitiers, but the sphere of their influence ranged from Catalonia in Spain, the southern part of France to the northern areas of Italy.

The language began to lose its currency within Occitania from the 15<sup>th</sup> century on though it was gradual in nature and without any real formulated or concerted pressure from the rulers of France who spoke French, the language spoken in the vicinity of Paris. The Edict of Villers-Cotterets (1539) made French the official language of government and legal documents though Occitan Language states it was not enforced to any great extent. <sup>4</sup> The language of court in the Occitan region became French and slowly the ruling classes adopted it because they saw it as the language of privilege and power. Borget points out that the drop in the use of local languages during this period is ironical because the rulers of France did not subject the local languages of France to any real concerted pressure. <sup>5</sup> However, it is true that the local languages were looked down upon sometimes with disdain and other times with suspicion, some questioning their loyalty to the crown. Given that the language's usage during the period up until the revolution was lessening, the language was still being used by a majority of the population. Less than 50 per cent of the people in France in 1789 spoke any French at all.

The French revolution occurred in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and replaced the monarchy with a republican government. Du Mont points out the government in Paris made an attempt to accommodate the various languages spoken throughout France for only a short period after the revolution. The government issued a decree banning the use of any language other than French even in the domain of the home. <sup>6</sup> Soon after, in 1790, the government began a statewide program aimed at educational reform. This was to entail the teaching and use of the French language to the exclusion and eventual replacement of the other languages.

From this time on local languages were only to be used in the teaching of French. Educational authorities decreed that any student caught speaking any language other than French were to have something, often a shoe, hung around their necks. These students were often asked to write sentences denouncing their own language. This treatment of speakers of other languages continued right up until the Second World War. According to Du Monde in "*Minority Sociolinguistics in Europe: The Occitan Language v the French State*" "this teaching method instilled a deep sense of shame in speakers of Occitan languages".<sup>7</sup>

Even though Occitan was under intense pressure from the French language from the time of the revolution, it was not until after the Second World War that the language began to decrease in usage dramatically. This was due in part to the modern state with its education system and the advent of the media coupled with the continuing hostility of the central authorities to the local languages. Slone states the attempt to bring economic development to the poorer regions of France, where the majority of other language speakers lived, saw a massive influx of outsiders into the region, further disrupting the cohesion of the language.<sup>8</sup> According to Caldwell in his article called "*Provision for Minority Languages in France*", even as recently as 1972, Pompidou said, "there is no place for regional languages in a France destined to stamp its seal on Europe".<sup>9</sup>

## Geography

Occitan is spoken in the southern part of the French Republic, accounting for one-third of France's area, roughly 190,000 square kilometres according to Occitan Language.<sup>10</sup> The population of this area is about 13 million. The main Occitan cities are: Nice, Marseilles, Montpellier, Clermont-Ferrand, Limoges, Toulouse, Pau and Bordeaux. There is no political division, which encompasses the language where it is spoken as there is for the Basque and Catalan speaking areas of Spain. The regions where Occitan is spoken or has been spoken traditionally will be divided into two groups based on information found in Euromosaic. One denoting a majority of the area as Occitan speaking and the other denoting only a part of the area as Occitan speaking.

Mainly:

Hautes Pyrenees, Gers, Landes, Ariege, Dorgogne, Correze, Tarnet-et-Garonne, Ardeche, Haute-Garonne, Puy-de Dome, Haute-Alps, Basses-Alps, Vaucluse, and Alps-Maritimes.

Partly:

Basse-Pyrenees, Isere, Allier, Lot-et-Garonne, Loire, Pyrenees Orientales, Haute-Vienne, Drome, Charente, Creuse, and Gironde. <sup>11</sup>

Occitan is also spoken in Monaco, in the Aran valley and Labistida-Clarenca in Spain, and in 12 alpine valleys in the Italian areas of Cuneo and Torino in the Piemonte, and in Calabria in the south.

### **Education**

The Deixonne act of 1951 allowed some presence in the education system for regional languages. Occitan is the main language of instruction in some schools, mainly the private schools known as Calendretas. These schools teach students of the pre-primary and primary level age groups. According to Euromosaic, in 1994 there were about 17 of these schools in existence with an enrollment of 665 pupils, a fraction of the number of students attending pre-primary and primary schools in Occitania. <sup>12</sup> One of the biggest concerns for students is the problem in continuing the study in later years. The lack of qualified teachers and funding are two of the major reasons for this. There are some classes at the secondary and tertiary level, but they are small in number. Assistance from the central authorities is very limited and it has been left to the local authorities to provide financial assistance for any initiatives in maintaining the language through education. In the Aran valley the language has been a part of the school curriculum since 1984. In the Piedmont area of Italy there is very little provision for the language in education, it is only offered as an optional subject in a small number of schools.

## Legal Situation

The legal situation of Occitan differs from state to state. In France, the authorities by and large, ignore the language. It can be taught in schools in Occitan, but usually as a second or foreign language, making it like German or English. The second article of the constitution was modified in 1992, which reiterated French as the language of the state. Laws pertaining to the regional languages are often ambiguous and contradictory. Occitan Language states Pinto, a professor at La Sorbonne University, has argued that the French Supreme court has overstepped its bounds when it has struck down attempts to improve the status of the regional languages.<sup>13</sup>

In Spain, Occitan Language says the language has official status alongside Catalan and Spanish. Official signs and documents are in Occitan. In Italy, some legal status was assigned to the language in 1999 and there have been some provision made for road signs to be put up in Occitan. The language is used in the local councils of the area.<sup>14</sup>

## Standardization Of The Occitan Dialects

After World War Two there has been an effort to standardize the Occitan language based on the Languedocien dialect. However, differing opinions between the intellectuals who advocated standardization and the every day users of the various dialects have hampered the effort. The 'Felibreen' spelling system is in wide use within Provence; with the other dialects tending to follow Alibert's Languedocien based 'Gramatica Occitania'. This system is universally representative of the different dialects to enable them to express themselves fully. Du Monde states in "*Minority Sociolinguistics in Europe: The Occitan Language v the French State*" that "today's Occitan activists have largely turned their attention away from the promulgation of a single linguistic standard for the whole of Occitania, instead allowing each region to teach its own particular dialect while emphasizing the dialects' close linguistic connections".<sup>15</sup>

## The Main Dialects

According to the Institute d'Estudis Occitans de Paris the six main dialects of Occitan can be broken up into three divisions: Northern Occitan, Middle Occitan and Southern Occitan. <sup>16</sup>

Northern	Middle	Southern
Limousin	Languedocien	Gascon
Auvergnat	Provençal	
Trans-Alpine		

### Limousin

Ethnologue, Limousin says that Limousin is spoken by 10-20 per cent of the inhabitants of the area where it was traditionally spoken. There are two sub-dialects, one being Haut-Limousin and the other being Bas-Limousin. Haut-Limousin is spoken in the areas surrounding Limoges, Guéret and Norton. Bas-Limousin is spoken around the Corrèze and Périgord areas. There are today very few children speakers of this dialect of Occitan with most speakers being in the over 40 years of age bracket. <sup>17</sup>

### Auvergnat

There are two sub-dialects according to Ethnologue Auvergnat, Haut Auvergnat and Bas Auvergnat. Haut Auvergnat is spoken in Cantal and south of Haut Loire and Bas Auvergnat is spoken north of Haut Loire and in Puy de Dôme. <sup>18</sup> The Haut Auvergnat dialect is used more frequently and has more speakers than the Bas Auvergnat dialect. There is limited understanding between the two dialects of Auvergnat. Auvergnat has perhaps the fewest number of speakers of any of the Occitan dialects though no data are at present available to confirm this.

### Trans-Alpine

According to Ethnologue: Provençal the Trans-Alpine dialect is spoken in the north-west corner of Italy on the French border. The number of speakers is estimated to be somewhere between 50,00 and 100,000. <sup>19</sup> The language is decreasing in use with each new generation and today less than 50 per cent of those aged 20 or under use it in every day communications. The

European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages states the Trans-Alpine speakers are now a minority in the area making up less than one-third of the region's population.<sup>20</sup> The Trans-Alpine speaking communities today are found in the higher valleys of the region, having been replaced by Italian in the lower valleys. The Trans-Alpine speaking areas have been undergoing depopulation for several decades now, as the economic situation in the area is poor. Not only are speakers in the region shifting to Italian, many speakers are moving out of the region in search of better economic conditions. The language does not have any official status from the central government, though the regional government passed a law in 1990 aimed at the promotion and protection of the linguistic and cultural heritage of Piedmont.

#### Provençal

Provençal (or Mistralien as it is sometimes known) is spoken by more people than any other Occitan dialect. However, it must be noted that the majority of the speakers are in their middle ages. Ethnologue: Provençal estimates that in 1990 there were about 250,000 people fluent in the dialect in France, with another 800,000 having some knowledge of it. The sub-dialects of Provençal are Nicard, Maritime Provençal, Gavot, Rhodanien, and Dauphinois. The area in France where the dialect is spoken is in the south-east, the province of Provence, south of Dauphine, and the region of Nîmes. It is also spoken in Monaco and Italy.<sup>21</sup>

#### Languedocien

Information from Ethnologue: Languedocien shows that no more than 10 per cent of the people residing in the traditional dialect speaking area can speak the dialect today with about 20 per cent claiming some knowledge of it.<sup>22</sup> It is spoken in Montpellier, Toulouse, Bourdeaux, Rodez and Albi. The four dialects are Bas Languedocien, Languedocien Moyen, Haut Languedocien, and Guyennais. Some scholars argue that it is a separate language from Provençal. Many of the speakers are found in the rural communities with most speakers classed as elderly.

#### Gascon

There were around 250,000 speakers of this dialect in 1990, based mainly in the Bearn



region of South Gascony. The Gascon speakers made up more than half of the population of the area. It was found that 51 per cent spoke Gascon with 71 per cent able to understand it. When asked whether they were in favour of maintaining the dialect, 85 per cent responded favourably. The dialect is spoken in Gascogne province, in areas from Medoc to the Pyrenees, and from the Atlantic coast to the Catalan speaking area. The dialectal groups are Bearanais, Aranese and Landais. There are some who argue that Gascon is a structurally separate language from the other Occitan dialects. According to Ethnologue: Gascon the dialect is also spoken in the Aranese valley in the Catalan area of Spain, with more than 5,000 of the 6,000 inhabitants of the valley being either able to speak it or understand it according to the 1991 census. The demographic break up of speakers was: 532 ages 2-14, 775 15-29, 733 30-44, 750 45-64, and 609 over 65.<sup>23</sup> It is referred to as Aranese in Spain. Euromosaic divides Aranese into three sub-dialects, Baish, Mijaranes, and Naut.<sup>24</sup>

### **Pronunciation Differences Between The Dialects**

In the three northern Occitan dialects, Auverngat, Lemousin, and Trans-Alpine, the pronunciation of CA in the standardized form of Occitan is CHA and GA is JA. Examples of this are CANTAR (to sing) pronounced as CHANTAR, and GALENA (hen) pronounced as JALINA. In these dialects most of the final consonants are not pronounced. V is pronounced V, and the final L becomes U. The disappearance of initial vowels is also commonplace as in AQUO pronounced as QUO and UNA as NA.

In Languedocien, the most conservative dialect, V is pronounced B like in Spanish and Catalan. An example of this is VIDA becoming Bida. In southern Languedocien, the final CH becomes IT. Therefore, FACH (done) changes to FAIT. Eastern Languedocien is very similar to Provençal.

According to Occitan Language the northern dialects, V is pronounced V in Provençal and the final L changes to U as in Provençal becoming Provençau. The final LH is also pronounced U. The R is not rolled as in other dialects, but is pronounced in a similar way to standard French. The final vowels are often not pronounced such as PARLAR becoming PARLA, the same as in the northern dialects. The pronunciation of O is a diphthong in most

Provençal speaking areas. An example of this is BON being pronounced as BWON. The pronunciation of the first person singular of the present tense is E in the Rhone region and I in Maritime Provençal.<sup>25</sup>

The dialect of Gascon differs the most from the standardized Occitan form and from the other Occitan dialects as well. This may be explained by its proximity to the Basque speaking lands and to some extent the Spanish speaking areas. Haase states that even though Basque and Gascon were completely different languages their close proximity in the south-west resulted in them influencing each other over the centuries.<sup>26</sup>

The initial F is pronounced H as in FILHA becoming HILHA. The final consonants LL are pronounced TH. The LL that appears in the middle of words changes to R. An example of this is BELLA becoming BERA. The N coming in the middle of words is often dropped completely. This can be seen in UNA becoming UA. The initial R often changes to ARR as in RIU to ARRIU (river). Hasse in "*Basque and Gascon Language Contact*" explains that "Basque words cannot begin with an R. Foreign words are integrated by prefixing an anaptyctic E, so the Latin loan word rege (m) becomes errege. Basque speakers shifting to Romance were confronted with lots of words beginning with R, which they could not pronounce without an anaptyctic vowel. Since they did not use Basque as a model language, the inserted vowel did not necessarily have to be E. Actually, Gascon inserts A in such a context."<sup>27</sup> QU and GU are pronounced KW and GW respectively. Occitan Language claims that another change is the metathesis of R. The position of the R changes in some words. The word CAMBRA becomes CRAMBA in Gascon. Similarities with other dialect changes are the final L becoming U and the pronunciation of V as B.<sup>28</sup>

## Differences Between Occitan And French

### Pronunciation Changes

Latin	Occitan	French
A (Nascum)	A (Nas)	E (Nes)
O (Florem)	O (Flor)	OE (Fleur)
E (Peram)	E (Pera)	WA (Poire)
AU (Auriculam)	AU (Aurelha)	O (Oreille)
AI (Faitum)	AU (Fait)	E (Fait)
EI (Dreitung)	EI (Dreit)	WA (Droit)

### Sound Suppression in French

Latin	Occitan	French
Caballum	Caval	Cheval (e dropped)
Maturus	Madur	Mur (d dropped)

According to Orbis Latinus the translation of Luke 15: 11-32 into local dialects of the Republic was undertaken in 1805 and they were officially published in 1831. From these one can see the differences between the French and Occitan dialects.

### English

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him ; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet : And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it ; and let us eat, and be merry : For this my son was dead, and is alive again ; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be marry.

### Standard French

Son fils lui dit alors : Mon père, j'ai pêché contre le ciel et contre vous ; je ne m'èrite plus d'être appelé votre fils. Mais le père dit aux serviteurs : Allez vite chercher la plus belle robe et l'en revêtez, mettez-lui au doigt un anneau, des souliers aux pieds. Amenez le veau gras et tuez-le, mangeons et faisons liesse.

### Auvergnat

Son garsou li diguet : Payre, iou è petcho contro le chia et contro vous ; et iou ne sè pu digne d'être appella voutre garsou. Adon le payre diguet en sons vali : Pourta vite la pu bèlo raubo et metta lo ii et meta li uno bago au de et de soulards en sons pès. Mena mai le vedet gra et tua le. Mangean et fagean bouon fricot.

### Gascon

E soun hil qu'eu digouc : Moun pay, qu'ey peccat cost'ou ceo è daouant bous : nou souy pas mes digne deou noum de boste hii. Lou pay que digouc a sous baylets : Biste, biste, pourtat sa prumèro raubo è boutats l'oc ; boutats lou la bago aou dit, e caoussats lou. Amiats lou bedet gras, è tuats lou : minjen è hascan uo gran' hesto.

### Provençal

Et soun fieou li diguet : Moun païrè aï peccat contro lou ciel et contro de vous, noun siou pas dignè d'estre appellat vouestre fieou. Alors, lou pèro diguet à seis domestiquos : Adduses sa premiero raubo, et vestisses lou ; mettes-li une bague ou det et de souliers eis peds. Adus-ès lou vedeou gras et tuas lou, man-gens e faguem boumbanco.<sup>29</sup>

## Grammar

Both French and Occitan retained the two-case system of Latin, the subjective and objective, until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but from that time the distinction between the cases disappeared in spoken French. Occitan has retained its fundamental features for example, the agreement of adjectives and nouns, plurals marked by adding 's' or 'es' and the conjugation of verbs. Occitan does not need the use of personal pronouns to indicate the person as French does. In this it is much closer to Catalan and Spanish. Occitan is similar to French in the use of the verb 'to be' with reflexive verbs. Occitan still retains the use of the subjunctive imperfect and the use of the progressive aspect. Both of which French no longer employs.

## Vocabulary

The bulk of Occitan vocabulary is derived from Latin, but it has borrowed words from other languages that it has come into contact with over the centuries. These include German, especially in the west areas where the language is spoken, Greek, from which words relating to medicine were taken from, and pre-Latin languages spoken in the area. Occitan Language states that this is especially true for Gascon, which has borrowed many Basque words. To a lesser extent, Celtic words were taken into the language as well. Today, French has had a large impact on the language with many French words finding their way into the language.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

The Occitan language is in grave danger of disappearing. The central authority's disregard and sometimes even hostile attitude to the language in France, where the overwhelming majority of speakers reside, make it difficult for those who are seeking to have it recognized as an official language of Occitania and give it a greater presence in education. According to The European Bureau For Lesser-Used Languages this situation persists in spite of European Union policies aimed at preserving and promoting the linguistic and cultural diversity found within its member countries.<sup>31</sup> Many factors, particularly economic, determine what language a people will choose to speak and no amount of legislation or good wishes will change that. However, each linguistic society, including the Occitan speakers, should have the right to determine the course that their language should take, free from outside interference. Occitan is in fact a separate language from French, and the central government's constant refusal to acknowledge or give assistance to the language, either morally or monetarily, and its outright hostility are the greatest obstacles to the normalization of Occitan. In a questionnaire recently undertaken by Enquistas sus l'emplec e l'imatge de l'occitan, 68 per cent of 1,000 people polled in the Occitan speaking area replied 'yes' to the item, which asked whether they think regional languages should be given official status. Sixty-eight per cent answered 'yes' to the question of whether internal borders should be re-drawn to better reflect the linguistic reality of France.<sup>32</sup> The French authorities need to change both the policies and attitude toward Occitan to better reflect the linguistic realities of France as well as the

aspirations of its citizens.

## Notes

- 1) Ethnologue. France. [http : //www.ethnologue.com/show\\_country.asp?name=France](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=France). Pp. 5 - 9.
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- 7) See number 6. Pp. 5.
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- 12) See number 11. Pp. 5 - 6.
- 13) See number 4. . Pp. 9.
- 14) See number 4. Pp. 7.
- 15) See number 6. Pp. 6.
- 16) Institut d'Estudis Occitans de Par ís. [http : //membres.lycos.fr/ieoparis/en.html](http://membres.lycos.fr/ieoparis/en.html). Pp. 3 - 4.
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- 21) See number 19. Pp. 3.
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- 27) See number 25. Pp. 4 - 5.
- 28) See number 24. Pp. 9.

- 29) Orbis Latinus.  
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- 31) European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages : The Intergovernmental Conference, The Maastricht Treaty and Lesser-Used Languages.  
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