TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

“La France est un des pays de l’Europe qui offre la plus grande diversité linguistique”

A discussion on the verity of this statement by DGLFLF in modern-day Europe.

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"Human language may be defined as a human-learnable communication system with conventionalized form-meaning pairs capable of expressing the entire communicative needs of a human society" (Hammarstroem, 2016).

With approximately 7100 of such languages currently recognised by SIL International (2017), a non-profit company endorsed by the International Standards Organisation (ISO), and many more which have become extinct, linguistic diversity is bound to be rife. It is impossible to put linguistic diversity in quantifiable terms. However, there are certainly countries where linguistic diversity is more prominenet. This discussion will aim to support the viewpoint of the DGLFLF[1] that France offers a linguistic diversity rivalled by few other European countries.

France is the fourth most populous European country (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018) with roughly sixty-five million inhabitants. In (1992), the French government amended the 2nd article of the Constitution to declare that French is the country's sole official language. As such, any official matters must legally be conducted through French – other languages may accompany the French version but may not be used it its stead. Their stance on the language has remained firm since then. Nonetheless, this unwavering stance has not resulted in the disappearance of linguistic diversity throughout the Republic.

The discussion will centre on three key areas that best encompass France's linguistic diversity: its minority languages, its imported languages, and the popular French argot *Verlan*. In the case of minority languages - which are distinct languages from French – we will look at how they provide diversity in the most simple form of being a different language from French, as well as how schools in the region of *Bretagne* promoting bilingualism has increased linguistic diversity in the region. Contrastingly, we will look at the latter two factors in a different light: how their usage in conjunction with French has seen them assimilated into the lexicon of many native French speakers, and the diversity that this increased lexicon provides.

[1] La délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France.

Minority languages are one of the principal factors in setting France's linguistic diversity apart from other European countries. Although there are many countries, such as Ireland and Switzerland, where minority languages have official status, the fact that French is the country's sole official language does not inhibit its linguistic diversity.

Breton is one of France's larger minority languages, spoken primarily in the northwest region of Bretagne. Although the total number of Breton speakers has plummeted over the last sixty years (as much as 80%, according to a publication (Broudic, 2010) by the French Ministry of Culture), support for the language remains strong. The introduction of the *Loi Deixonne* in 1951 was a watershed for minority languages, with bilingual pedagogy being permitted for the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic.

Although other minority languages such as Alsatian have a larger proportion of speakers in France, Breton is aided by a very progressive regional government who have supported the language and continuity to support its advancement. In the aforementioned 2010 publication, Phillipe Jacq, Director of the Office of Breton, describes the importance of Breton adapting to new technologies for the survival of the language. Popular software programs, such as Facebook and Skype, have a Breton version that is "regularly updated". It is evident that the passion is there among French people for the language - its 31,655 Wikipedia articles place it around 52nd-56th most popular among the 250 languages (Jacq, 2010) offered by the information website. As a form of open-source software, Wikipedia relies on ordinary people to collate the articles. Linguist David Crystal (2000, p. 141) notes the positive results this progressiveness towards technology can yield for minority languages: *"an endangered language will progress if its speakers make use of electronic technology".*

This passion for the language is not shared as strongly by the government, however, and the diversity Breton and other minority languages provide is undoubtedly inhibited by the protectionist policies enforced by the government. France remains one of the only countries not to have ratified ETS 148 (1998), a treaty aiming to "protect and promote the historical regional or minority languages of Europe". Furthermore, of the nearly 14,000 (2011) students in bilingual (French and Breton) schools, fewer than half attend public schools - instead they attend a *Diwan*[2]school or go through the private sector.

This disparity in commitment between the regional government and the national government undoubtedly inhibits the progress of Breton. Although the government has increased supports for the language gradually, they remain very regressive and protectionist regarding the effects of increased linguistic diversity on French as the national language. In fact, Breton appears to be resurging in spite of government policy rather than as a result of it. This notion is often applicable to minority languages.

Cunliffe & Herring (2005) suggest a variety of reasons that may explain why Breton is better served for the future than other minority languages in France: *"it is no longer sufficient to think [of technology] in terms of design for a community or design with a community; rather design by the*

[2] Diwan schools are Breton-medium schools. They teach French and Breton through language immersion and are modelled similarly to other minority language programs such as Irish *Gaelscoileanna*.

community should be the model". The support provided by the regional government for Breton media and technologies is unrivalled among minority languages in France.

Immigration is another factor which has contributed to France's rich linguistic diversity. France has an expansive history as a colonizing nation, with colonies spread across almost all of Earth's continents. Although it now controls just a handful of overseas territories (Ministry of Overseas Territories, 2018), its effects on its former colonies are indisputable. French is the secondary language across the North-African countries typically grouped under the moniker of "Maghreb" countries (Universalis Encyclopedia, 2018). Similarly, France has inherited certain cultural and linguistic practices of its former colonies.

Unlike other European colonial powers, such as the United Kingdom, France has been the beneficiary of increased linguistic diversity simply due to how diverse their colonies were. Arabic is the primary languages spoken in Northern Africa. Western Africa presents a litany of tribal languages, while various creoles are spoken across French Polynesia. Furthermore, even though other European countries such as Spain and Portugal have their languages used widely by former colonies, France's proximity to its colonies separates it from these countries and the effect of this proximity on reciprocal linguistic diversity is not to be understated.

These languages have all made their mark in France to varying degrees. A simple walk through any *lycée*[3] could hear any one of a plethora of words that have carved their way into French. One such example is *wesh*, coming from Arabic for "How are you?" (The Economist, 2015). As noted by the author, this is not a term limited to the *banlieue*[4], with the speaker being described as a "white middle-class girl in a posh high school near Paris". As foreign words and phrases continue to grow in popularity within France, it is important to note that they do not replace the original language. Instead, they diversify the main language as they become used in conjunction.

However, France, especially its government, is tentative with its acceptance of foreign words becoming normalized within the French language. In recent years, Anglicisms have become much more common in France and its society, particularly as English continues to develop as a *lingua franca* of major international companies and software. *L'académie francaise,* the main adjudicator of the French language, have a frequently-update column (2018) entitled '*dire, ne pas dire*' which serves to provide French alternatives to foreign phrases. However, many of these attempts to stifle the impact of foreign languages fall short and the suggested French alternatives are cast aside by the majority of its speakers.

As Noailly (1990) notes, the increased prominence of Anglicisms could arise from English being more morphologically "synthetic" as a language, whereas French tends towards a more "analytical" approach. This is a noteworthy point, especially in the modern-era where we continue to see a rapid rise in technological neologisms. As English is the dominant language in this field (among others), French purists are struggling to provide suitable French alternatives before the Anglicism has been adopted into the lexicon of French speakers. The effects of technology are also acknowledged by Kim (2015), who notes that French speakers are more likely to be exposed to "non-physical"

[3] Lycées are institutes of education for students usually between the ages of 15-18.

[4] Banlieue translate to suburb. However, it is also used to describe areas with high rates of poverty and immigrant population.

encounters with English, whereas Francophones in Québec are more likely to encounter English orally.

Interestingly, we can see that Québecois policy has been more successful in regulating the usage of certain common anglicisms, such as *smartphone.* The proposed French substitutes *mobile intelligent/ordiphone* were used just 1.87% (Kim, 2015, p. 90) of the time in French newspaper *Le Monde,* whereas the Québecois counterpart *La Presse* used one of the two terms in just under ninety-nine percent of instances. Once more, we may note that France's linguistic diversity appears to be thriving in spite of government policy, rather than as a result of it.

Linguistic diversity in France is not, however, limited to its minority languages nor the languages which have grounded themselves in French society as a result of immigration. The French language itself is rife with diversity. One of the best examples of this is *Verlan*.

Verlan is a form of French slang which revolves around syllabic inversion – the name itself is an example of Verlan: *l'envers [lãvɛʁ]* 'the wrong way round' -> *verlan [vɛʁlã].* It has grounded itself in French culture, particularly among younger generations. In fact, some terms such as *meuf [femme 'woman' -> meuf]* and *beur [Arabe 'Arab' -> beur]* have become so commonplace that they have become reverlanized *[meuf -> femeu, beur -> reubeu]* in an attempt by its speakers to maintain verlan's status as an argot. The moniker of popular Belgian electronic musician *Stromae* originates from Verlan for *maestro.* One study (Campion, 2015) saw Verlan most commonly described as 'cool', 'young', and 'normal', with 93% of participants noting themselves as having at worst a middling understanding of Verlan.

Interestingly, other argots similar to Verlan, such as *largonji* or *loucherbem* – used most commonly in the butcher trade, have not been nearly as successful at widespread infiltration in France. Argot has long since had connotations as a language form used by criminals. In 1836, a Parisian police chief (Vidocq) published a *dictionnaire d'argot* as well as a book on its role in criminality (Les Voleurs). While Verlan has become normalized in modern-day France, many authors note that it still, however, carries certain connotations. Méla (1991, pp. 57-60) notes that, as is the case for all argots, verlan is common in domains associated with "traits of illegal activities". Furthermore, she describes its most frequent users as "the most defiant with regards to social rules".

It is important to distinguish Verlan, as well as similar argots and jargons, from regional languages such as Breton in that they are not distinct languages. Rather, they act as a supplement to their mother language. As Méla (source) acknowledges, even a conversation that appears "dense" in usage of verlan "rarely contains more than 10% of code-words". This viewpoint of Verlan as a complement of French is supported by one study by Bertucci (https://www.cairn.info/revue-le-francais-aujourd-hui-2003-4-page-25.htm), where the majority of (student) subjects believed that "a correct French" and Verlan are able to be spoken at the same time.

Other countries throughout Europe are also rich in argot. English has pig-latin; cockney rhyming slang: Sweden has Rövarspråket. However, no form of argot provides more diversity nor has been adopted as heavily as Verlan in France. The trend of Verlan growing in popularity is likely to continue as new generations continue to become more and more heavily exposed to technology as a medium of communication. While many purists may revile at the thought of this, it is evident that blue-collar France is more appreciative of the linguistic diversity that Verlan provides.

In this discussion, three main aspects of linguistic diversity have been examined: minority languages, imported languages, and the French argot of Verlan. Although linguistic diversity is not in any way limited to these aspects, they are factors which aptly illustrate France's status as a bastion of linguistic diversity. Furthermore, the latter two factors are excellent examples of how linguistic diversity can still thrive in the face of adversity – i.e. the linguistic concept of pragmatism vs. purism.

France's purist attitude towards its language has also been discussed in several places. Notably, it has been noted on several occasions that government policy is extremely protectionist towards French, and that this attitudes can be extreme regressive for linguistic diversity. However, it is important to note that this protectionism is not without reason, and that, although it is a subsequent effect, it does not serve to inhibit linguistic diversity. The best supporting European example is the decline of Irish in Ireland.

Following colonization by the British Empire, extensive anti-Irish legislation was put in place, such as a 1536 missive from King Henry VIII (Cahill, 2007) ordering that "every inhabitant within said town endeavor themselves to speak English". This led to the number of Irish-only speakers falling to just 20,953, or 0.5%, by 1901 (Carnie, 1995). Although protectionist policies have been introduced by the Irish government (all public bodies must have stationery any signage, and oral announcements in Irish (An Coimisinéir Teanga, 2003)), the Irish language is still categorized as "definitely endangered" by UNESCO (2017). Furthermore, the 2016 Census (p. 69) saw a drop of 4.3% of daily speakers of Irish (outside of the education system) from the 2011 Census (p. 40). Thus, the decline has reoccurred despite being a century removed from occupation and despite the protectionary policies enforced by the Irish government. One could also argue that this decline has a corresponding decline in Ireland's linguistic diversity.

Although it could, without much hesitation, be assumed that French would never suffer a similar demise in its own country even if the government adopted a *laissez-faire* approach to French, their protectionist standpoint is supported from a historical standpoint. Moreover, they are gradually becoming more progressive as time passes, with the introduction of more favourable policies such as the *Loi Deixonne*. This gradual, cautious, approach does not, as we have noted, appear to stifle linguistic diversity in France. The purist approach of the government is well complemented by the more pragmatic approach of its citizens, forming a linguistic melting pot of sorts.

It is this balance of contrasting approaches that I believe separates France from its European counterparts, and affirms the *Délégation*'s statement that France is one of Europe's most linguistically diverse countries.