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2019A7PS0554P
31 October 2020

Main Currents of Modern History (HSS F234)

Self-Study Assignment

The Linguistic Consequences of the French Revolution

The French Revolution, seen as one of the most significant moments of our modern history, gave birth to important cultural/political ideas that have become ubiquitous in our Eurocentric world, ideas that the fundamental doctrines of other governments are founded upon. One of its far-reaching consequences is the establishment of the French language as the identity of France. Once a nation thriving with linguistic diversity, France has dwindled into a monolinguistic country, with French becoming one of the most spoken languages of the world. Language is intimately tied with culture, and linguistic hegemony has affected France's cultural history too. Since then, governments of other nations have also tried to control language use, regarding language as a symbol of unity/homogeneity. This paper is an attempt to examine the linguistic consequences of the French

Revolution by analyzing the relationship between language and nationalism, the resulting linguicide in France and the changes in the French language.

1. Linguistic diversity in France before the Revolution:

During the *Ancien Régime* (late Middle Ages to the Revolution), France was teeming with dialects[1] with a rich cultural diversity that resulted in distinct socio-linguistic groups/fragments. There were 2 major dialect families: *Langue d'Oïl* in the north (Germanic/Frankish influences) and *Langue d'Oc* in the south. The 30 (approximately) regional dialects varied much in their grammar, pronounciation and vocabulary and were viewed as distinct tongues, personifying each province and its customs(Bell 2000, 110). Each province was governed in its own language, under the higher authority of the monarch, while all official documents were written in Latin (the language of the Church).

The Parisian dialect (*Francien*) of *Langue d'Oïl* evolved into modern day French. It was spoken by only a small number of people then but was considered an important literary language due to the political/cultural/geographical significance of Paris[2]. The *Ordonnance de*

[1] Since the promotion of French as the official and primary language of France, all other languages, existing or extinct, are referred to as dialects in comparison, and specifically as *patois* in French. This is actually a derogatory term as it is usually used to refer to oral and not literary languages, with no standard script, which is not true of many of these idioms. In general, languages are called dialects if they are of lower political/social significance than others.

[2] This is also why it was considered the "mother tongue" by many, as it is called in official ordinances.

Villers-Cotterêts of 1539 formally established, for the first time, the superiority of *Francien*.

Its articles 110 and 111 (still in use) enforced the use of French for all legal work and official documents, replacing Latin and the dialects. (This is evidence of there being *some* desire of linguistic uniformity even in the monarchy.)(Moore 2014, 5) It states that all such documents must be delivered in "the French mother tongue and not otherwise" so that "there [cannot] be any ambiguity or uncertainty" in their interpretation(*L'Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts* 1539). This ordinance drastically changed the political/administrative/legal importance of *Francien* and its knowledge became a requirement for important jobs, paving the way for the elite few in Paris to take up influential positions in the government.

Following this, French was promoted as a universal, artistic language like Latin and Greek in *Défense et illustration de la langue française* by the Renaissance humanist Joachim du Bellay (1549) and by writers like Rivero and Voltaire. French was then given a standard grammatical description for the first time in *Tretté de la Grammaire française* by Louis Maigret (1550) and the *Académie Française* was established (1634) as the official authority on the French language. These steps helped cement the status of French before the revolution.

2. The French Revolution (Role of language):

The French Revolution, a reaction to the injustices of the Middle Ages, is considered to be a bourgeoisie revolution – one led by the affluent, French-speaking middle class, living in towns/cities and involved in trade/commerce. The Third Estate (peasants and the bourgeoisie) led the revolt against the other estates and the King, opposing the taxes being levied on them, to pay for the monarchy's debt (after having aided wars against the English, particularly the American Revolution) and the extravagant expenses of Louis XVI. At a meeting of the Estates General that was held to settle issues regarding taxes, the representatives of the Third Estate walked out in defiance, when their proposals for equal representation were denied. They declared themselves to be the *Assemblée nationale*(June 17, 1789), cementing their resistance against the monarchy(Greer and Lewis 1984). This Assembly carried out most of the important revolutionary activities of the time and Paris became the hub of radical ideas for a new France.

The communication of ideas is key to popular reform and the leaders of the Revolution realised the importance of supporting the non-French speakers who made up the majority of France. It was decided that the decrees/proclamations of the assembly would be published in every dialect so as to promote their dissemination by all the people of France(Higonnet 1980, 2). The National Convention, formed in 1792, had also established a

commission to create and proliferate translations which, by this time amounted to 96 volumes of decrees and 18 of constitutional laws(Ager 1999, 24), and the *Académie Française* had been abolished. It was thus believed that everyone had the right to participate in the revolution, and there was no undue focus on any one tongue.

With the coming of the power-hungry Jacobins, the idea of French being the driving force of the revolution was popularised[3], decimating the multilingual/diversity-friendly ideas of the Assembly. The roots of this complete turnaround in opinion lie in the fact that

- French was the language of the bourgeoisie (the *classe dirigeante*/guiding class of the revolution, composed mainly of lawyers, administrative officials and educated Frenchmen, who compulsorily had to know French according to the *Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts*)
- The critical events of this period took place in Paris, the birthplace of *Francien* (which slowly gained the exclusive right of being called a *langue*/language while all other languages became *patois*)[4] and hence, it became symbolic of the overthrowing of the monarchy.

It is also interesting to note that the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen de 1789* and the corresponding draft by Olympes de Gouges, though

[3] They began seeing French as the reason for the existence of the modern nation-state, and hence anyone who did not speak the French language was seen as being against the new France, as not being a nationalist.

[4] Another reason is the way the map of France was redrawn in 1790, creating 83 departments. The old geographical arrangement of provinces was destroyed and led to the mixing up of some dialects and their cultures, while French, at the heart of the country in Paris, remained unaffected.

espousing the concept of equality, had no explicit mention of linguistic freedom.[5]

3. Barère and Grégoire:

The reports of two prominent revolutionaries: Barère and Grégoire, during the Jacobin phase proved to be the turning point in this 'linguistic revolution'.

On January 27, 1794, Bertrand Barère de Vieuzac published his *Rapport du Comité de salut public sur les idiomes* (Report of the Committee of Public Safety on Idioms). The Committee of Public Safety, of which Robespierre was a prominent member, had almost dictatorial power during the Reign of Terror (September 5, 1793-July 27, 1794) and advocated the eradication of linguistic/cultural heterogeneity to preserve the integrity of the state during a civil war and attacks by neighbouring countries. Barère (an influential member of this committee) assumed that peasants were opposing the new government due to a lack of understanding, that past attempts of translating to communicate the ideals of the revolution had failed. He thus linked the dialects(symbolic of the *Ancien Régime*) with counter-revolutionary/royalist tendencies that tried to maintain the religion-

[5]Article XI concerned the freedom of speech but made no allusions to any language.

obsessed monarchy, and with the foreign powers trying to supress the new French nation(signifying anti-nationalism)

"[*patois*] perpetuated the reign of fanaticism and superstition, ensured the domination of priests/nobles…prevented the revolution from entering important departments, and may favour the enemies of France."

He believed that the only way to maintain momentum in creating a modern nation-state was for everyone to be united in their language

"Let us therefore give citizens…the surest agent of the revolution, the same language."

He glorified French

"the first to proclaim frankly the rights of man and the citizen…destined to give the world the most sublime thoughts of liberty"(Barère 1794)

and made recommendations to enforce the teaching of French in the peripheral provinces whose dialects had greater dissimilarities with French.[6]

With these measures, Barère first linked "national patriotism and universal elementary education"(Gershoy 1927, 425) and began the war against the *patois* but it must be observed that he, like most other educated Frenchmen of the time had discarded the view that all these languages were distinct/unique but belittled them as simply crude versions of Francien(Bell 2000, 110), ignoring their heritage (ironically to their benefit).

[6] Owing to the immense power of The Committee of Public Safety, a decree was passed the same day this report was published, enforcing Barère's recommendations.

These radical linguistic reforms were built upon by Henri Jean-Baptiste Grégoire in his *Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d'anéantir les patois et d'universaliser l'usage de la langue française* (Report on the necessity and means to annihilate the patois and to universalize the use of the French language).

In 1790, the Abbé Grégoire was charged with studying a new wave of peasant unrest (before the civil war). He attributed these revolts to misunderstandings arising from the varying vocabularies of different languages and carried out a sociolinguistic survey for his 1794 report. He associated these dialects with feudalism and counter-revolutionaries(like Barère) and believed that the ignorance of the mother tongue was a barrier to liberty and reform

"the exclusive use of French [is] intimately linked to the maintenance of liberty, to the glory of the Republic"(Grégoire 1794)

Unlike Barère, however, he saw the dialects not as languages fundamentally the same as French, but as alien tongues/cultures encroaching upon French territory. He recorded, with dismay, that there were 30 such diverse languages in the country and that "barely 3 million citizens"(12%) spoke fluent French in all of France(Bell 2000, 112). "This perception of radical heterogeneity was the key to his entire linguistic reform policy."(Bell 2000, 114) He thus recommended more drastic measures of uniting the nation, like French education not just in the peripheral provinces but all over France and the exclusive use of French in every municipality(Ager 1999, 26).

He thus went farther than Barère to try to establish sociopolitical cohesion through francization, linking the rise of a democratic nation with the use of a common idiom

"in order to melt all citizens into the national mass…one must have identity of language"(Grégoire 1794).

4. The Aftermath:

After these reports were published, the *Académie Française* was re-established and the Decree of 2 Thermidor was enforced on July 20, 1794. This decree sanctioned 'linguistic hegemony and terror' by specifically hunting down dialects, and required that

- all public/private acts be drawn up in only French
- all private schools be converted to state schools and all teaching be done in French
- the use of other idioms by government officials be penalised(Ager 1999, 28).

Owing to the fall of Robespierre and the end of his Reign of Terror, the law was suspended on September 2, 1794 and no significant progress in francization been made by then.[7]

[7] Education was still being conducted in French, but not exclusively in French.

This was not, however, the end of linguistic terror. Regional languages had become symbolic of fragmentation and anti–republic tendencies. They were avoided/excluded out of hatred and pride in the French language that had been built up by the ultra-patriotic bourgeoisie. The Revolution, thus, without immediately altering the linguistic landscape of France, changed the mindset of the French people towards their linguistic history/diversity, asking them to look down on dialects and their cultures as inferior.

The French language itself did not change much during the revolution. Political/administrative words were invented. Words like *nation, patrie*, *fraternité* that previously had religious connotations, now reflected the ideals of the Republic. New temporary words were created by the revolutionaries eg: *sans culottes* (republicans), *opineur de la culotte* (pro – aristocrat), *alguazil* (police), *Citoyen/Citoyenne* (citizen) instead of *Monsieur/Madame*. The Jacobin leaders "added to the French/*patois* dichotomy" (French against the *patois*, as a pair of opposites) the pairs "*ville/campagne, national/local, mouvement/equilibre, circulation/isolement, lumiere/obscurite, ecriture/voix"*(Flaherty 1987, 322), connecting the second word of each pair with inferiority/backwardness, which has remained this way for long.

5. Present Status:

The Jacobin concept of the inferiority of dialects and the need for homogeneity persisted after the Revolution and had a great impact on the lawmakers of the coming centuries. Future governments(including

Napoleon's rule), even though some adopted policies to preserve the slowly dying languages, majorly advocated the use of only French, as an identifier/symbol of the nation. French is still the official language of the country(since the *Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts*).

The lower prestige of the *patois*(a pejorative term) has led to a certain amount of shame being connected with the knowledge of these languages. In Occitan (*Langue d'Oc*), *La Vergonha* refers to the humiliation of Occitan speakers, making them feel ashamed of their own mother tongue, that has led to a drastic decrease in the number of Occitan speakers in the world. In the case of Breton, in the 19th century, speakers of this dialect were publicly shamed and given clogs to hang around their necks. Such public measures effectively stopped languages and their associated cultures from being passed down, out of a desire to avoid embarrassment(Moore 2014).

Thus, though it is undeniably true that a common language united France and decreased the linguistic fragmentation that existed before, the disdain/exclusion/humiliation of dialects has led, not only to linguicide(like that of Gaulish and others on the verge of extinction), but to the more momentous loss of culture/history. The newer generations, however, have been proactively trying to revive these dialects, viewing linguistic diversity

as an asset instead of a liability, and as a reflection of valuable ideas/customs of the past. [8]

This history is particularly relevant to India's linguistic landscape. With 22 languages, apart from multiple dialects, it is hard to single one out as the language of the country, but attempts have been made in the past to make Hindi the national language. Such an act could lead to homogenisation but could also cause languages and their associated cultures/history to die out, like in the case of France. The story of France's linguistic revolution thus serves as a cautionary tale and highlights the importance of history as a tool to prevent errors in the present.

[2482 words]

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[8] Recent governments have been pressured into granting official recognition to and protecting the dialects of France, and many laws have been passed in the last decade to this effect.

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Some sources that were mentioned in the prelim draft have not been used, while some others have been added to the list. This is a very vast topic, probably not well suited to such an assignment, as there are many avenues for research and a plethora of information. All the available information has not been included in this paper and some interesting aspects (comparisons of the dialects, backgrounds of Barère and Grégoire, minor laws passed later in the Revolution after the Decree of 2 Thermidor, the recent decline of French etc.), though pertinent, have been left out on purpose.