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MUSICAL AND LINGUISTIC TRADITIONS IN CENTRAL FRANCE: POETICAL OR POLITICAL REVITALISATION?

*On n'est pas le produit d'un sol, on est le produit de l'action qu'on y mène
Félix Castan, 1984*

Occitania, Qu'Es Aquò? Poetic Language Versus State Language

The term 'revitalisation', when it applies to a language or a cultural tradition, is paradoxical, as it often involves new elements that re-create meaning and language games (Wittgenstein, 1921). Within a society, the interpretation of these elements from the past are stuck in an essentially contemporary analysis. Through an interest for the past, it points to the future of a socio-cultural space. Mostly, the idea arose in the West from the first identity and social crises of the 19th century, and especially from the Romantic movements of the time. It is linked with the cultural, and communicational, realm through its search for a *language*; something expressed through different media and notably, as we'll aim to show here, by a poetic form of expression, inscribed in a space that is pragmatic, political and resolutely performative.¹

According to Félix Castan, an initiator of the Occitan decentralisation, the intellectual and artistic life of Meridional France in the 1980s followed two main axes: a regional horizon carved out of a national culture that had recently become concerned with its cultural diversity, or local support for an Occitan tradition, for perspectives and actions rooted in a geo-cultural space whose borders were still undefined. It is with the transition of the 1960s, a period in which, in a decolonisation context, arose a generalised interest for linguistic and cultural diversity (see the cultural policies of André Malraux or Jean Vilar for 'provincial' areas), that the musical traditions of Auvergne were structured into associations, looking for representation and intercultural exchange. La

1 Social sciences have turned in recent years to the study of "performatives" which, in philosophy of language, refer to speech acts that create a reality when they are spoken (like in: "It's a boy!").

Bourrée Gannatoise, created in 1965 by Jean Roche and whose traditions and memory the Association Nationale Cultures du Monde (ANCM) kept alive by organising the yearly Festival de Gannat in Northern Auvergne, is a remarkable example. There was a proliferation of these musical organisations and associations with similar objectives (AMTA Auvergne, CRMT Limousin, etc.). We can also look out to the persistent Parisian imaginary representations of these ‘provinces’, of their ‘lazy exoticism’ (Castan, 1984), of a lost paradise and folklorist desires borne by great writers such as Mauriac, Sand and Giono in the 19th and 20th centuries. Occitania was born or reborn somewhere between these two horizons. The Occitan language, restricted already for several generations to an ultra-local use, used as a ‘local marker’ among rural communities (Eckert, 1980), was caught in power struggles, between prestige, associated with the French language, and stigma, associated with Occitan. The language itself was often considered and presented in French universities as a simple variant of French, despite its structure being much closer to Catalan, Italian, Spanish or Portuguese than to French, which is excluded from the Romance linguistic continuum.

Occitania cannot be reduced to the administrative categories created by the 2014 territorial reform that aimed to decentralise the French Republic, a reform that still refused to acknowledge the geo-cultural realities of the country (Janicot, 2015). Occitania is not a nation or a region, but an area tied together by cultural kinship (as you will never hear someone from Auvergne say that they feel at home in Provence or in Béarn). Occitania is one with the ‘langue d’oc’ and its dialects, which find their roots in Dante’s expression. Indeed, the literary and musical success of troubadours (the francisation of ‘trobador’, ‘finder’ in Occitan, the one who has the gift of giving a word poetic power) allowed for the diffusion of this language to the intellectual of Medieval Europe. The Occitan-speaking territory, in its widest definition, was a part of the Kingdom of France, which recognised as early as the 12th century the existence of a *lingua gallica* and a *lingua occitana*, vernaculars that progressively became administrative and judicial languages that would replace Latin. In 1539, François I became the first French king to wish to turn his own language into the official language of the normative power of the kingdom. Through the Villers-Cotterêts ordinance, French became the written language of the administration, leaving the numerous other languages of France alive in their spoken forms. The birth of printing helped to create nation states by diffusing a common shared language, across communal boundaries, thus creating the

first imagined communities² (Anderson, 1983). But it was with the French Revolution and with the philosophical values of the Enlightenment being imposed politically to the nation that the Jacobin representatives aimed to create a linguistic policy: French being the language of power, an egalitarian society required that everyone be able to speak it. Of course, before the founding of the Republic, there was no concern if the peasants could not speak the language of the administration. The francisation of this new democratic society was influenced by what are essentially intellectual and social constructs, especially based on the famous observation by Abbot Grégoire (1794), surprised as he was that French was spoken so seldomly outside of Paris. This linguistic ideology gained much power with 19th century republicans. Mandatory schooling, enacted by Jules Ferry in 1882, created a massive process of linguistic substitution in oral use (Lieutard, 2011), resulting in the current de-sozialised and marginalised linguistic situation in Occitania. There are no more unilingual Occitan speakers today, as it always co-exists with the language of the State: French, Spanish in the Val d'Aran or Italian in the Piedmont valleys.

Linguistic revitalisation movements spontaneously associated poetics – the aesthetic function of a language (Jakobson, 1963) – to Occitan. Since its medieval golden age, it had been tied to musical theatre, to poems and adventure stories told by troubadours, to celebration, to love and to the very first flowerings of Western Romanticism. Since the first movements aiming to revitalise Occitan in the 19th century, it is this golden age that is celebrated, recalling the reach it had across Western Europe and the role it played in literary circles. It is in this essentialist retelling of the poetic core of a language that an ideal enemy comes to be defined: politics. It is easy to understand that, since the Late Medieval period, the language of the troubadours would have stood in opposition to a State language, made up of an *Oïl* dialect and an excessively political desire for linguistic standardisation, enforced by power and institutions (Milroy, 2002). The marginalisation of regional areas and dialects became especially effective once national education became ‘mandatory, free and secular’ notably after 1945. Regional languages became symptoms of ignorance, of illiteracy in the eyes of the State. They allowed for a geographical characterisation of educational needs. Auvergne, a region nestled between the French Midi and ‘Centre France’ (a name crudely given to characterise the traditions – notably musical – of this area with linguistic, but not cultural,

2 American historian Benedict Anderson worked on the concept of ‘nationalism’ and theorised the fact that ‘national’ communities are built through imaginary categories, notably around the idea of a shared language.

boundaries), became tied to Paris for historical but mainly economic reasons, and to Southern France for cultural, if not strictly for linguistic, reasons. It became a part of this movement towards Occitan values and engagement.

The Auvergne language is a North Occitan dialect located at the periphery and the margin of both the Occitan cultural region and the central French region, making it in many ways 'le patois du patois'. UNESCO classifies it as one of the most threatened languages in Europe.

Popular Celebrations, Music and Linguistic Revitalisation

Since the events of May 1968, different musical movements have arisen in Occitania and in other cultural regions in France, from the first folk singers (Claudi Marti) to groups from Marseille and Toulouse (Massilia Sound System, Fabulous Trobadors) and up to recent musical and linguistic revitalisation movements (San Salvador or La Novia in Massif Central, who perform with 'traditional' instruments, such as 'cabrette', 'cornemuse' [a pipe instrument] or the hurdy-gurdy). Music as a theme for linguistic and musical revival helps to highlight France's characteristic multiculturalism, during a period in which immigration is perceived to be foremost a societal problem rather than a cultural input; music is a medium that highlights potential for social cohesion (Magnat, 2018). Modern Europe sees the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages as a bridge for the Romans and a route for various exchanges between Christian and Muslim populations. Modern Occitan polyphonic singing makes good use of the typical vocalisations of the Mediterranean world (Lo Cor de la Plana, Cocanha). Auvergne's musical and cultural influences take both from the Mediterranean south as it does from ancestral Celtic traditions found in Central France. Many modern artists and groups use Occitan as a means for artistic production: the language itself is presented on stage and celebrated. These movements, often composed of young musicians, do an excellent job of communicating their work and their performance, heightened by the possibilities of the language, which serves as the central and most powerful tool to reverse the stigma associated with French regions (Sayad, 1991). The musical varieties of the north-Occitan area represent a form of alternative work, as well as a cultural revitalisation of the folk culture, such as the polyphonies and the traditional instruments from Auvergne.

It seems that when a language is highly endangered, the more its poetic potential is highlighted, meaning that those who perform the language lay claim

to their total agency within it³: if one can play, sing, write in a language, it must be because it has a culture and an identity; but that also highlights the problematic situation a disappearing language finds itself in, as the whole phenomenon occurs generally when in contact with a major communicational language. There is insistence on variation and not on communion. There is a risk the language is made into a purely poetic object, leaving its communicational potential by the wayside. Occitanist movements have tried to counter this effect (CIRDOC, IEO, Lo Congres notably), by developing linguistic learning tools for Occitan, just like with any usual communicational language learning. The paradox remains that these renowned institutions are using the same forms of linguistic normative prescription to which they are reacting, even sometimes inciting some learners to shape their Occitan according to the variant spoken in a certain place, where it would be better or more purely spoken (Eckert, 1980).

Poetics of Absence, Perception of a Language

While modern Occitan has been seen throughout its rocky revitalisation process primarily as a poetic phenomenon, for good and bad reasons, it is still the result of political forces and events. Occitania was born from militant and intellectual movements, starting with the famous Félibrige of Mistral in Provence, as early as the 19th century. We could even say that it was the first linguistic revitalisation movement in the West, driven by deeply Romantic themes. Châteaubriand had already evoked the poetic potential of a language carried by its last speakers, referring to Cornish, which had disappeared in England but has been recently revitalised. In literature, we can also find Rimbaud and Proust, or the Italian and Russian futurists who reinterpreted a language's strength to make it into a tool for work. These movements wished to exalt the spoken word, to instil their representation of the world and the speed of modernism into it, before sinking in the 1950s into the fatality of the conditions of language with Beckett, Joyce or Camus, who, in absurdist theatre or in stream-of-consciousness literature, denaturalised the transmission aspect of written language, turning it into a creative absence, a non-value. The written word is a bridge from 'here/now' to 'there/before' and the posterity conquered by writing, which had made humanity into language, stops existing, as Derrida theorised (1967). The evolution of poetry is tied to the evolution of social codes. It is therefore not surprising to find that at the same time and

3 In social sciences, agency refers to the possibility for a being to act upon the world, as opposed to what a structure (institutional, for example) imposes.

in subsequent years, many writers looked for an up-language, untouched by the impurities of daily speech and able to promise salvation, redemption and provocation. These were the exact aspirations of the Félibrige, a movement driven by Romanticism and by a search for new forms of poetic expression: the Occitan language is seen by its members as the ‘ancient’ language, a description that means nothing, as a language cannot be dated since it, like all others, forms out of variations, making every language as old as every other! Occitan was tied since the Middle Ages to poetic expression and so it is no surprise that this bias shone through when its revitalisation was conceptualised.

In 1968, Occitan sociolinguist Robert Lafond theorised the notion of *internal colonialism* to describe the structural political and economic inequalities present between the regions of a single nation state. The Occitanist movement took on a political aspect and it might be from this point on that disruptive relations developed between natural speakers, academics and artists, as the language became a demonstrative object (intellectual or performative) and not something to be reintegrated into a standard communicational process.

The Political Object and Reclaiming

This poetic phenomenon existed in parallel to a resolutely political and cultural construction. In Auvergne, those who spoke *Auvergnat* perceived only marginally that their language was part of an Occitan whole, which they saw as being reserved to militants of metalinguistic considerations, whose linguistic use was an act that demanded reflexivity and was not solely communicational. According to Bourdieu, the region, before being a reality, is a representation and the core issue of different struggles for power, articulated around a regionalist discourse which is itself performative. There, we can find on one side the scientists (historians, ethnologists, linguists, economists, etc.) and on the other side, the ‘global’ population created by the omnipresent but disguised institution of the State and made up of the citizens concerned by the regional area: inhabitants and elected representatives. The scientists construct a critical scientific discourse from elements that suggest facts: for example, an Occitan regional unity based on a common language, despite the global population – according to the speakers – not sharing the same language, the same accent, sometimes even between two neighbouring villages (recent phenomenon of ultra-localisation of linguistic usage). Knowledge always seeks to create recognition and develops a semiotic of representation: it creates flags, emblems, products for tourists, a bilingual toponymy. For Bourdieu, it always comes down to a monopoly of power, which decides what things can be seen, believed, recognised, which creates and unmakes social groups. Citizens make

the choice of their mental representation of their territory and their identity, one institution or the other dictating implicitly how things are. If Occitan is mocked for its sharp accent, this is the result of a hypercorrection that is itself a social construct and of a national education system that teaches its children French is the language of the Republic, the intangible key to success and culture. The Occitan accent is reserved in the national media for Sunday afternoon rugby matches, and not for the national news broadcast. This links up with the idea that State discourse gives shape to hate speech (Butler, 1997), by invoking a representation of a tolerable and excusable stigmatisation. Bourdieu does not, however, insist on the fact that scientists and the State share the same objective: recognition, by instating themselves as pillars of knowledge, by proposing the representation of a territory as an objective cultural space, by elaborating a critical scientific discourse “based on elements that suggest facts”. This points to conditions of adhesion: “speakers and addressees must correspond to a certain type of social persons, to socio-historical structural conditions” (Agha, 2006), citizens always choosing a discourse and constructing their representation of the territory, which itself in turn creates a representation of their identity.

On the other hand, there are invisible rights, granted to institutions, empowering them to think borders, to make and unmake them. From a ‘patois’ to a publicly spoken language, we can articulate a dynamic of power struggles, just as the State did in the past, by erasing the legitimacy of the languages spoken in regional public spaces, made into ‘innommables patois’ (unnameable dialects) (Abbé Grégoire, 1794).

The linguistic and cultural revitalisation movement in Occitania, and more specifically in Auvergne since its language dynamics have not been as entrenched and asserted, shows that musical performance⁴ is associated with an imaginary representation of the socio-cultural world, which itself serves as a battlefield for political ambitions. These overlaps and disjunctures between natural speakers, new speakers and regionalist militants, which I theorise in my research, highlight the weaknesses of the French monolingual policies, which discriminate against so-called ‘regional’ languages, despite the population of Auvergne being in favour of teaching *Auvergnat* in schools and for a greater recognition of its musical traditions (IFOP survey 2006). France is one of the only countries to not have signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages,

4 Although we have used the word ‘poetics’, since my research is essentially based on the field of performative ethno-poetics.

despite being a European country with an important linguistic diversity and a high number of endangered languages according to UNESCO's Atlas of Endangered Languages.

Studying the uncountable number of *meme pages* (for example *Mêmes décentralisés pour provinciaux et francophones oubliés* or *le Front de Libération Auvergnat*) is a powerful way of assessing how the rural world and its regional heritage can be reclaimed by inverting the stigma attached to it, by reclaiming the stigma itself. It is also interesting to find that Auvergne natives who have moved to urban centres, the eternal sphere for representation of these cultural imaginary worlds, are usually the ones who create this counterculture.

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