

## *Part I*

### Beginnings

I was a crowd pleaser as a child, an attention-grabber. I was always nice, and I was “popular” in high school. But inside I was a quietly angry girl with a rich and obsessive fantasy life, because I felt that there was no place for me in the real world of serious people. How this came about is my business, but what might better have taken the form of healthy rebellion became resistance, and I became one of those students who got A’s and D’s. But I was good at standardized tests, so I managed to get into Oberlin, where I arrived with a sense that I didn’t deserve to be there and continued to cultivate the occasional D.

I got at least some of my anger from my mother, who loved mathematics more than anything, and apparently was brilliant at it. But back in the nineteen-twenties, on her way to a PhD, the Columbia math department forced her to choose between her upcoming marriage and her fellowship. I’m a grateful and guilty product of that choice, and I’ve been living the life she should have had. I grew up on stories of my mother’s clashes with the gender order – how her mathematical triumphs were attributed to my father, how as a decoder during World War II she had to put up with a roomful of male colleagues talking about how stupid their wives were. I heard much of this from my father, who had a hard time living with his complicity in this cultural script, and did everything he could to keep me from falling victim to sexism, institutional or otherwise.

Although I knew in high school that I wanted to study linguistics, it wasn’t very available as an undergraduate subject. So during the summer between my freshman and sophomore year in college, I went to Columbia to take William Diver’s Introduction to Linguistics. Diver was an inspired teacher, and I was in heaven every single day of that course. But although I was determined to be a linguist, I had no picture of myself as a real academic. Or a real anything for that matter. Approaching graduation, I became increasingly afraid of the future, as I struggled with the contradiction between my academic ambitions and my inability to do school. I had a very nice boyfriend, and for a while I thought I could get married and get a job, and gradually weasel my way into graduate school. But at Christmas his parents gave me an ironing board, an iron, and a set of cutlery with stars on the handle. I was overcome with terror, and I’m still ashamed of the cowardly way I backed into, and then out of, that engagement.

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He deserved better. After graduation I went home to New York to find myself and a nine-to-five job. I ended up as a bilingual secretary at Rockefeller University (then The Rockefeller Institute) to Belgian Nobel Laureate Christian de Duve. De Duve was a wonderful person, a great boss and friend, but it was soon clear to both of us that I didn't want a nine-to-five job, that it was time to bite the bullet and become a linguist. I applied to Columbia but didn't get in. Uriel Weinreich advised me to take courses and try to prove myself, and reapply. So I got a job teaching high school and moonlighted taking linguistics courses at Columbia: two semesters of morphology and syntax taught by Bill Labov (a new Assistant Professor), and Romance Philology taught by Mario Pei. It was a very full year, and I loved both the linguistics and being in the high school. It was being around teenagers that I really liked, not so much the teaching, and I hated dealing with classroom discipline. When I left the high school at the end of the year, I told myself that I would find a way to come back. Little did I know that it would be under such great circumstances.

When I arrived at Columbia, Bill Labov was the coolest act in town. His MA thesis, the Martha's Vineyard study (1963), had been published, his dissertation, the New York City study (1966), was about to be published, and he was into his Harlem study. He was young, politically engaged, casual, outgoing, with boundless energy and excitement. Bill has been a central presence in my life ever since. He has been a mentor, an inspiration, on occasion an adversary, a frustration, and always a beloved friend. And he kept me alive through graduate school, where I was continually terrified and felt I didn't belong.

I never asked a question or volunteered an idea in class or even in conversation, for fear of saying something stupid. When I had a question in class, rather than asking it, I rushed off to the library to find the answer. I wasted huge amounts of time poring over books looking for answers to questions that I could have gotten in a second if I'd only asked. And of course I didn't always find the answers either. I didn't think I was stupid, just clueless. I loved collecting and working with data, and I knew I was good at it, but I always thought I didn't – or couldn't – really understand theory. Years later, after hearing me give a talk on the impostor syndrome at the LSA, my classmate Benji Wald told me he'd thought I never said anything because I was too cool. I'd felt anything but cool, but I'd probably tried to seem cool just to get by. For all I know, my defense may have intimidated other insecure people. Nowadays, talk of the impostor syndrome is everywhere, but back when I was in graduate school it felt shameful and private.

## 1 Gascon

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I became a dialectologist in Marvin Herzog's course on Yiddish dialectology, during which I began a lifelong relationship with the French linguistic atlas (Gilliéron 1902–10). I have never revered books – I like reading them, but their object-hood has never meant much to me. I'm not one of those people who loves the touch and smell of books. This atlas, though, gives me the shivers. I couldn't and still can't get enough of it. The sheer wonder and eternal value of the work that went into it is overwhelming, as is the pleasure I've gotten from tracing sound changes as they wander and interact across the countryside. The paper I wrote for Herzog's course turned into my master's thesis, on morphological constraints in the raising of Latin unstressed \*a to [o] in southern France. I found the phenomenon in the intersections of the spread of this change with the spread of the deletion of the plural marker. I thought it was interesting, but Bill had to point out its relevance to current theory. I didn't publish it (Eckert 1985) until sixteen years later, when its theoretical message was no longer timely.

My work with the atlas made me want to hear the southern dialects I'd been focusing on, and an exploratory trip in the summer of 1968 gave me a taste not only of what the dialects sounded like, but of the stigma attached to them. I'd never been a Francophile, so stigmatized peasant dialects were just what I needed to be comfortable with France at the time. I put an ad in the New York francophone newspaper *France Amérique*, hoping to find a speaker of one of these dialects. I got a response from a man who told me dialects didn't exist, and one from a young guy who figured I was trolling for a French boyfriend and claimed to speak all dialects. But sitting in a laundromat on Broadway one day, I met a woman who had seen my ad but hadn't responded because she'd thought it sounded suspicious – after all, what normal person would want to study a peasant dialect? She was Anna Cau, from Ercé, in the Gascon-speaking Pyrenees of Ariège, and she became my wonderful consultant for the months leading up to my fieldwork.

Ercé was the source of many of New York's French restaurants and restaurant workers. And lying in the midst of the isogloss bundle that separates Gascon from Languedocien to the east, it had the added distinction of sporting

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a particularly stigmatized dialect. Since Madame Cau had also lived for some time in the Languedocien dialect area, she often provided me with forms in both dialects, and it was clear that she thought the Languedocien versions were “better.” It also became clear that some of the words she provided on the first pass were nonce borrowings from French. The Gascon equivalent she gave for the French word *fleuve* ‘river that flows into the ocean’ was *flobe*. Later as I read through my word list to check my phonological analysis, she balked at that one, and said she’d never heard that word and that main rivers and tributaries were both called *ribero*. There were several other items that she rejected on similar grounds, and it became clear that her bilingual competence included borrowing rules that essentially reconstructed several hundred years of sound change. This nonce borrowing, I decided, would be the topic of my dissertation.

In the fall of 1970, I landed in Toulouse with a Nagra and 100 five-inch reels of Scotch recording tape. In my early days in Toulouse, I found a warm welcome among participants in the regional Occitaniste movement. I was introduced to people in a community near Agen who were working to revitalize the language, and they arranged for me to live with a family with three generations of speakers – the only family I ever met with children growing up speaking Occitan. I was touched by these people’s commitment, friendliness, and generosity, but I was interested in the dynamics that had given rise to language loss, not the potential cure. So I thanked them and headed south into the Pyrenees, in search of a rougher situation – a language without hot running water, so to speak. My search for a field site is to be told elsewhere, but I ultimately landed in Soulan, one valley and a couple of isoglosses over from Ercé.

Soulan is a commune of six villages arrayed over the south side of a mountain. I lived in St. Pierre, the main village of the commune, with a population of about eighty people. I lived with the family that owned the café, benefiting both from a family life and from a built-in excuse to hang out in the café, which was also the house’s living room and kitchen. People came to the café not only to drink and socialize, but to buy wine, milk and cigarettes as well, so it was the ideal place to see the world go by. And André (Pépi) Vidal, the very colorful old man who had run the café for a generation, was a local, even regional, gossip clearinghouse. Pépi owned the physical café, but in order to collect his pension, he had to give up the café license. Joseph Rumeau, a plasterer from the higher village of Boussan, had bought the license from Pépi and moved in with his wife and three children ranging from two to fourteen years old. The older generations are gone now, but the three kids, Gisèle, Bernard and Patricia Rumeau, now middle aged, are like close family to me.

During my year and a half in Soulan, I maintained my friendships and connections among the Occitanistes, but felt increasingly at odds with their

ideology. The stigma of “patois,” and the greater stigma of the patois of the region around Soulan, was manifest in all things, and only exacerbated by the work of the Occitaniste movement. The movement was infected with the purism that had led to the language shift that they were trying to reverse, as the need to establish a standard language added a layer of stigma to actual spoken varieties. Kids from Soulan who took Occitan in high school learned only that their parents’ language was not “Occitan” (or I should say not *even* Occitan). And while the Occitanistes celebrated my ability to speak Occitan, they thought the dialect I spoke was bizarre. Even Pierre Bec, the revered Occitan dialectologist whose book (Bec 1968) tracing the isoglosses in the region of Soulan was my bible, couldn’t help correcting my Gascon to make it sound more “standard” – even though he himself had documented the very forms he was rejecting.<sup>1</sup>

Turning a peasant language into a regional standard required a lot of ideological work, and speakers of local dialects were being asked to cleave to a polity that had little meaning or advocacy for them. I was annoyed that the Occitanistes often referred to peasants with the condescending phrase *les braves paysans* ‘the good peasants’. It had a similar ring to the common bourgeois way of referring to a fully adult woman who cleans your house: *petite portugaise* ‘little Portuguese’. I put my thoughts about this some years later into the following article.

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## THE PARADOX OF NATIONAL LANGUAGE MOVEMENTS

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### Introduction

A political movement that seeks to unify a large and diverse population needs to elaborate the construct of unity within and of the common threat from without, and to convince each segment of the population to identify its own experience and interests with that construct. The popularity of the movement depends not only on the severity of the problems it is designed to confront, but on its success in presenting the common interest of the entire population in such a way that all segments of the population can identify their own situation with it. A fundamental paradox arises when these considerations are put into the

<sup>1</sup> Specifically, he corrected the past participle in *n’ai cap comprenuch* ‘I didn’t understand’ to *compreish*. (This was as if I’d said in French *je n’ai pas compris*, and he had corrected me to *compris*.) He said that while he knew that the Soulatan form was *comprenuich*, it was ugly and that the least I could do was say *comprenut* – the pronunciation of the next commune to the east (closer to Languedocien).

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practical context of a regional or national movement. To aspire to any form of autonomy, a region needs to be large and diverse enough to comprise a viable economic unit. At the same time, the movement must be able to point to an underlying common heritage to justify unification of the region and its separateness from a larger political unit from which it desires to achieve autonomy. This is usually effected through the elaboration of a cultural, historical and/or linguistic heritage common to the diverse population of the region. But since the uniformity imposed by this elaboration will tend to be at the expense of local or sub-regional differences, the process of regional standardization may very well be reminiscent of the kind of external oppression that the movement is designed to counteract. A paradox arises, therefore, when the needs of unification require the submersion of authentic local or sub-regional differences. To the extent that the submersion leads to the belittling of local characteristics, segments of the population will not identify with the movement. This problem arises particularly in areas that are far enough from the regional center that there are extreme cultural and linguistic differences from what is considered the regional standard.

The following discussion will illustrate just such a case in a community removed culturally and linguistically from the center of a regional movement that intends to represent the community. The case in point is in Occitania (southern France), and illustrates not inadequacies in the movement, but the pitfalls in even the most carefully considered regional movement. For the force of this paradox is more a result of the conditions that the movement exists to counteract than of any serious oversight or elitism on the part of the movement. This community's alienation from the regional movement arises from the very problems that should create its solidarity with it. But the very problems that give rise to the movement become acute sooner in the poorer and more isolated areas of the region, and make such an area subject to apparent regional as well as extra-regional oppression. The symbols of the regional movement can bear, for a marginal area, meanings reminiscent of existing external domination. The discussion will focus on language, since language is the clearest and most powerful symbol in the movement. However, insofar as cultural variability affects geographically marginal areas in a way similar to linguistic variability, any discussion of local cultural features in relation to the regional movement will follow closely.

### **Occitania and Occitan**

Fishman has pointed out (1973) that for language to be an effective symbol of a nationalist movement it must be the current common language of its population, or one must be able to trace that language back to an era when the population was united. Fishman's criterion of authenticity is ideally

answered in Occitania and the language is perhaps the clearest issue in the movement.

That Occitania is a clearly defined linguistic region has been long established in the literature of Romance linguistics. The north and south of France are separated by a concentrated bundle of isoglosses running west from Bordeaux and fanning out to the east to define the region known as Franco-Provençal. The area to the south of this bundle of isoglosses is Occitania. Several bundles of isoglosses divide Occitania, in turn, into a number of regions, but the differences between regions within the South are not nearly as great as those that separate the south as a whole from the north. Dialect variability within the South has always been considered a source of richness, and pan-dialectal comprehension has traditionally been an important part of linguistic competence in this region. As a result, one does not have to go back in history to find authenticity for Occitan. But history does enrich Occitania's claims. The different regions of Occitania have yielded great rich literary traditions (d'Artagnan from Gascony, the troubadours of Provence) and the political and economic importance at various eras of different parts of Occitania contrast sharply with the region's current dependence on the north.

But Occitan's most important claim to linguistic authenticity is the fact that it remains to this day the predominant language among older people in rural villages, and an important linguistic presence throughout the South. It has only been in the past thirty to forty years that French has supplanted Occitan as the native language of most children in rural areas of Occitania, and virtually all of these younger people have at least a passive competence in Occitan. Occitan is symbolic of their villages, their families, their families' way of life. It is the language that surrounded them in their childhood, a language that has been absorbed by much of southern French popular culture, and many of whose expressions and exclamations they have incorporated into French. The language, therefore, is still alive enough for all Occitanians to be a prime symbol of solidarity throughout the region. But over the past hundred years, as the abandonment of the region and the acquisition of French has been the main means to economic survival for individuals in Occitania, Occitan has also become symbolic of the poverty and isolation of these villages. One cannot talk about the two languages of Occitania, Occitan and French, without invoking their opposing social connotations: connotations that have developed over the years of language shift.

The oldest Occitan speakers in many areas were the first speakers of French in their communities, and they have seen the replacement of Occitan by French as the predominant language in the course of their lifetime. This transition was not usually gentle, and the disgrace suffered at the hands of French national education (to say nothing of northern visitors) is an important bond among the wide population. Perhaps Occitan unity is based as much on common linguistic

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experience as on common language. In fact, the Occitan movement bases much of its appeal on this common experience. The appeal of common linguistic experience stems from the process of language shift.

### Language Shift in Occitania

While French was introduced as the administrative language in Occitania in the sixteenth century, there was no official desire to introduce it as a standard language until after the revolution of 1789 (Brun 1923). At that time, French became symbolic of democracy and national unity, and a long campaign ensued to rid the country of non-French dialects, considered to be a major barrier to mobility, unity, and participatory democracy. Free national education, actually implemented in rural areas of Occitania 100 years later, became a powerful agent of centralization and of the eradication of non-French varieties. As centralization and industrialization pulled the population out of Occitania and into the north, increasing numbers of Occitanians learned French in order to escape the increasing poverty of their region. In recent years, as forces in Occitania have mobilized against domination from the north, this abandonment of the Occitan language has served as a powerful symbol. Part of its power stems from universal and very personal experience of stigmatization of Occitan culture through its language.

The introduction of French into Occitania followed a pattern of gradually evolving diglossia, whereby French replaced Occitan in increasing numbers of domains progressing from the periphery to the center of community and private life.<sup>2</sup> In this process, French gained dominance, with the need for economic mobility as the main force, and through the interplay between the social statuses of the languages themselves on the one hand and of the domains they represented on the other. As a result, Occitan was not simply replaced in an increasing variety of domains; it was shamed out of existence in domain after domain, reaching from outside the village eventually into the home and into relations within the family. Linguistic shame was exercised in a series of social oppositions associated with the domains of the languages: French was the language of the outside, the rich, the educated; Occitan was the language of the home, the poor, the uneducated. This series of oppositions eventually entered the Occitan language itself, leading to considerable borrowing from French in a constant effort to make Occitan “more acceptable” (Eckert 1978). In the course of language shift, the dialects of Occitan became increasingly localized. One of the earliest social oppositions between French and Occitan stemmed from their

<sup>2</sup> The process of language shift in one Occitan community is described in Eckert (1980a).

association with the outside and the inside respectively, as the strangers who entered the villages tended to be Francophone and to be representatives of the government or of French institutions. Therefore, as French became the language for dealing with the outside, Occitan dialects retreated into local obscurity, to be used only with natives of one's own village. Thus people stopped thinking of their native language as the language of the region and began to think of it as a "local" language. This localization had several major effects on regional solidarity: It decreased awareness of the unity of the various varieties of Occitan, and the traditional pan-dialectal competence of the speakers throughout the region, and it quite simply transferred all extra-local communication into the French domain. This localization of Occitan was intensified by the establishment of French as the written language: For the size of the Occitan-speaking population, Occitan has been virtually invisible in public media. The dialects, therefore, lost prestige not only insofar as they were politically subordinated to French, but also insofar as they were fragmented and reduced in status from a gradual dialect continuum to a miscellany of apparently disconnected local varieties. Because of the clear genetic relation between French and Occitan, it has been easy for the dominant, French, society to label all non-French Romance varieties as "dialects of French." The popular notion that the various forms of Occitan are "perversions of French" is still widespread. The considerable regional and local variability of varieties of Occitan is invoked as evidence of a process of decay, and the comparative homogeneity of French is taken as proof of that language's superiority.

The Occitan movement is comprised of efforts of various degrees to reverse the process of economic, linguistic and cultural colonization from the north. Since language is a key to the unity of Occitan, the language policy of the movement is of crucial importance – in fact, for some, language is the primary issue. As mentioned above, the great authenticity of Occitan's linguistic claims stems from three facts:

1. A considerable segment of the population still speaks Occitan.
2. The fundamental relation between all dialects of Occitan is overwhelmingly apparent.
3. The populations of Occitania have had similar experiences with linguistic oppression from the north.

The exploitation of this authenticity, however, presents many pitfalls, for the reintroduction of Occitan as the language of the region can be conceived of in one of two ways: It can be an undoing of the process of language shift that has accelerated over the past hundred years, and thus reinstitute Occitan in its original role, or it can simply replace French as far as possible with Occitan. The former assumes time and considerable means. The latter is more realistic

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in a practical sense, but less realistic in its aims to establish authenticity in modern terms.

### The Need for Standardization

Fishman has pointed out the contradiction in the claims of authenticity and the need for standardization. For although the pragmatic and symbolic functions of the regional language are closely interconnected, they can also be contradictory. For Occitan to replace French in its public domains requires:

1. Putting Occitan into intraregional communication. This must be done through the selection and imposition of a standard variety or the reestablishment of global pan-dialectal competence.
2. Putting Occitan into written communication through the extension of French orthography to Occitan, or through the development of a standard Occitan orthography.
3. Putting Occitan into technological and educational use, through broad-based lexical innovation. This can be done either through regular borrowing from French, or through the development of new Occitan vocabulary.

In cases 2 and 3, the first option is the one taken informally over the past generations as speakers of Occitan have adapted to technological development in its bilingual context. These “natural” options, insofar as they are responses to, and institutionalizations of, French domination, are symbolically unacceptable for a regional language movement. The other options, though, however appropriate they may be for the movement, create other difficulties, for establishing the regional authenticity of a language and connecting that language to the speech of individuals are frequently separate problems.

The original, authentic linguistic unity of Occitan lay in the gradual differences of its geographic varieties (and in the speakers’ corresponding pan-dialectal competence) and in the common differences between these varieties on the one hand and French on the other. For several reasons, however, it is difficult for a regional movement to exploit this “unity in common diversity.” First of all, native pan-dialectal awareness is one of the aspects of Occitan that has been damaged to some extent in the process of language shift. But far more important, as a symbol, Occitan must be a language that can be opposed to French and that can compete with French on the latter’s own terms. For French, as the current standard, has acquired the right to set the requirements for “language-hood” even for the regional language. One such requirement is homogeneity. The association of variability with “irregularity” has dominated linguistic thought over the years, and has had its role in the denigration of Occitan varieties. Particularly in the purist climate associated with French, a symbol cannot be variable. The compromise has been to establish several