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## OCCITAN LANGUAGE IN FRANCE: HISTORICAL RETROSPECTIVE

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*The article involves descriptive analysis of Occitan language's features (terminology, current status, linguistic features) and also its interactions with French language within France (francitan, français d'oc). Occitan language's features considered in the article can serve as basis for fundamental scientific works as well as for classes on Romance languages' history, Romance languages' dialectology, Occitan and French languages' history and grammar as well.*

**Key words:** *Occitan language, French language, France, area, terminology, linguistic features, current status.*

### **Introduction**

#### **Ethno-Linguistic Situation's Features within the Modern France.**

Unlike many other countries in the world, France is presented as a single state with a single nation and a single language as well as French language is officially recognized as single language of one nation in a single state.

In reality, not a single one, but several ethnic groups live within France: several traditional (Occitan, Corsican, Basque, etc.) and introduced (Arabic, Gypsy, etc.). Moreover, these ethnic groups' languages are spoken within the French Republic.

Throughout its history, France sought to strengthen national and linguistic unity whereas many ethnic groups, on the contrary, strived for national, cultural and linguistic independence within the French Republic.

The following study is devoted to Occitan language's descriptive analysis because regional or small languages, such as Occitan, are part of world's national heritage and play a dominant role in national identity's formation.

#### **Occitan Language's Area and Terminology**

First of all, it is necessary to give a short review of Occitan language's origin. There are two main concepts on this issue:

✓ The first concept is based on large Gallo-Romance unity's existence and dialects' appearance caused by Germanic superstrata, i.e. it characterizes Germanic languages' influence as insufficient for complete assimilation of conquered population languages. [Wartburg 1941]

✓ Second concept's basic idea is Gaul was divided into Northern and Southern parts by means of romanization process. Ligurian and Iberian dialects became

widespread in Southern Galia, its influence was so great that it managed to withstand Germanic influence, and, as a result, Occitan (Provençal) language underwent minimal changes from Germanic languages, in contrast to Franco-Provençal and Oil languages. Thus, beginning from the VII<sup>th</sup> century, Gaul's territory was divided into certain linguistic zones, as a consequence, Gallo-Roman languages turned into Occitan language within Southern regions of the country. [Brun 1923]

Economic aspect of Provençal (Occitan) language's development is also worth taking into consideration. The thing is the South of France was economically and culturally more developed than the North of the country in the XI - XIII centuries [Gak 1986:107-108] that contributed greatly to Provençal (Occitan) language's prosperity: it was one of the most developed literary languages of Western Europe.

Occitan became France's regional language in the XIII<sup>th</sup> century due to Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229) when the French kingdom annexed Occitania.

It should be mentioned that since Occitania was richer and more developed than French kingdom, King Louis VI decided to marry his son and heir Louis VII to Aliénor d'Aquitaine in order to strengthen France's influence in this region. Descended from ancient and wealthy family Aliénor d'Aquitaine was Duchess of Aquitaine and Gascony. Marriage to Louis VII contributed to her rise as Queen of France (1137-1152) and then Queen of England (1154-1189). She was mother of two English kings - Richard the Lionheart and John Lackland. [Fedorova, Ivanova 2018]

One more point should be made in this connection, the Duchy of Aquitaine was a feudal state existed in the South-West of France at the end of the IX<sup>th</sup> - the first half of the XV<sup>th</sup> century. The origin of the word "Aquitaine" refers to the Latin word "aqua" (water). This region is included in Occitan language's area along with Gascony.

As far as the name of the region Occitania is concerned, it comes from Latin language's local dialect name (langue d'oc), which by this time had successfully developed and turned into the main communication means within this region.

Throughout its history, the South of France had many names: it was called Provence, Occitania and so on. Initially, "Provence" was the name of Roman province formed during Gaul's capture in the II<sup>nd</sup> century BC. Later, France's entire Southern part was called Provence, and, as a consequence, the language spoken by Southern inhabitants was called Provençal. Nowadays, the term "Provence" is correctly applied only to that part of France where the modern French province is located.

As it was mentioned above, the term "Provençal" was originally used to refer to the form of speech used by Romanized Gaul's Southern inhabitants in the Middle Ages. Then, this term was replaced by the term "Occitan" in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, when there was a movement to revive Provençal culture. Currently, the term "Provençal" is associated only with the modern province of France and is considered as one of Occitan language's dialects as well.

It should be noted that the term "langue d'oc" was proposed by the great Dante Alighieri (1265 - 1321), who defined difference between Latin language's Southern and Northern dialects within former Gaul's territory by means of pronouncing the

affirmative particle “yes”: it is pronounced “oc” in the South and “oil” in the North. [Dante 1868:19]

Moreover, the widely-used term “langue d’oc” is used to refer not only to the form of speech developed in Roman languages’ formation period, but also to modern Occitan language’s dialect. Thus, Occitan language’s dialects are Alpine, Auvergne, Gascon, Languedoc, Limousin, Provençal. As we can see the Languedoc dialect, despite its name, is not the same as the Occitan language itself, but is only a part of it.

It is noteworthy that Gascon dialect is often classified not as Occitan language’s part, but as an independent dialect or even as a separate language due to its features formed under Basque language’s strong influence.

We may also add that Alpine dialect is a form of speech spread within a small area of neighboring Italy.

Finally, it should be noted that during Provençal culture’s prosperity period the form of speech existed in the South of France was usually called Old Provençal and even today modern Occitan language is sometimes named as New Provençal language.

### **Occitan Language’s Path: from Oblivion to Revival**

Old Provençal language, from which Occitan language originated, was a developed language and was used in vast majority of communication spheres: in troubadours’ poetry and prose of the XII<sup>th</sup>-XIII<sup>th</sup> centuries as well as in administrative and legal correspondence, etc. Furthermore, it was widely used in writing speech instead of Latin language up to the XV<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, old Provençal language was forcibly replaced from written sphere by French language in the XVI<sup>th</sup> century. The latest texts recorded in old Provençal language dated to 1620. Only its Gascon dialect resisted the longest: it was used in written sphere until 1789 in the province of Bearn. [Sibille 2000: 37] As a result, old Provençal language lost its status as a national language and turned into regional one. Besides, its writing tradition was almost completely lost by the XV<sup>th</sup> century and poetic works’ authors often used francized writing systems.

Interest in old Provençal culture and language was revived only at the beginning of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. There were numerous publications devoted to troubadours’ works as well as old literary trends were revived in works of Southern France’s writers. This interest was especially supported by efforts and own works of the Provençal poet - Frédéric Mistral (1830-1914) and by the editor of the Avignon newspaper “La Commune” - Joseph Roumania (1818-1891).

It is also important to note that the beginning of Occitan literary tradition’s revival dates to 1854, when the literary school called “Felibridge” was created in Provence. Felibrists began to publish “Almanach Provençal”, reformed Occitan language’s spelling, revised and enriched Occitan vocabulary: F. Mistral began to compile a dictionary and its first parts were published under the title “Trésor dou Felibridge ou Dictionnaire Provençal-Français” in 1879; J. Roumania wrote and published funny stories and fairy tales in Occitan language, etc. Soon, Felibrists’ works aroused great interest in Provençal literary culture and creativity on the part of numerous poets writing

in Occitan language, such as Felix Gras, Paul Aren, etc. Nevertheless, Felibridge movement failed to create Occitan language's unified literary form because of its dialect fragmentation as well as serious political and economic problems caused by French language's dominance over Occitan language.

Nowadays, Occitan language is taught in public schools and universities of Toulouse, Montpellier and Bordeaux. It is considered as educational subject and as scientific research's object.

One more point should be made, in order to popularize Occitan language, a number of organizations have been created: literary academy "Académie des Jeux Floraux"; Occitan language's bureau "Office de la Langue Occitane"; the commonwealth of major publishing houses "Letras d'òc" and so on. [Bestolkova 2022]

### **Occitan Language's Current Status in the Modern France**

Exact number of Occitan language's speakers in France is unknown, since there are no official statistics on regional languages and dialects in modern French Republic. The reason for this is simple: conducting a language census in France would mean official recognition of many regional languages' existence within the state, not only a single one (French language). For example, relevant data registration would force Southern France's authorities to recognize Occitan language's existence as an independent system in its opposition to French language and, as a consequence, it would mean official recognition of several nations' existence in France instead of a single one, that, in turn, could become a cause for France's division.

It is necessary to take into consideration that there is France's officially recognized concept of the state and the national structure: "There is an organic connection between a nation and a state. In accordance with this concept, nation is a human community, its legal embodiment is a state. Therefore, use of the words such as "nation", "nationality", "people" in order to refer to people living in France is suspicious. Isn't it, according to the idea that a nation cannot exist without a state, a nationalist desire to create a state separate from the French one or an attempt to establish racist inequalities, i.e., to assert collective rights for separate community, thereby provoking discrimination within the French people, which by definition, consists of all citizens without any distinction among them? The words "nation", "nationality", "people" are applicable only to refer to France's citizen totality in the modern French Republic. It is for this reason that the reference to "Corsican people as an integral part of French people" was protested by the Constitutional Council in 1991." [Le Coadic <http>]

As it was mentioned before, there is a lack of accurate statistics on Occitan language speakers' number at the regional level, but researchers suggest that many citizens of modern France's Southern regions are bilingual, i.e. they speak one or other Occitan dialect along with French language. [Sauzet 1988: 212]

According to Jean Sibille, there were from 2 to 3 million people out of a total 14 - 15 million people in France's Southern regions, who spoke Occitan language in 2000. At the same time, the author notes that, according to available information, Occitan

language speakers' number was about 10 million people in 1920. There is also a significant difference in level of Occitan language's knowledge and proficiency between urbanized and rural areas as well as between young and old generations: Occitan language is less spoken in cities and among young people than in countryside and among elderly. [Sibille 2000: 39-42]

All in all, Roman speech existing in the modern France's Southern regions can be considered in the following three ways:

- as a single Occitan language differing from French one in its state and functioning;
- as a group of Occitan dialects differing structurally from each other;
- as a set of patois opposed to French language as non-prestigious, provincial forms of speech without any prospects for development.

### **Occitan and French Languages' Opposition**

In order to illuminate properly Occitan language's historical development, we must consider two main concepts of linguistic opposition between Occitan and French languages:

✚ The basic idea of the first concept is there is no clear geographical and structural transition between French and Occitan languages, both languages smoothly pass into one another. This concept is based on French Republic's national-linguistic structure described before.

✚ The second concept is opposite to the first one, since it is based on the idea of separate national groups' and traditional languages' existence within France, such as French and Occitan, between which there is a significant difference and a clear geographical border. However, this concept does not contradict the conclusion that there is a transitional zone between French and Occitan languages.

It should be noted also that there are serious difficulties among specialists in determining Occitan language's independent level. The thing is Occitan language's origin is close to French and it is not easy for speakers of these two languages to draw a line between them. Moreover, Occitan language itself involves numerous dialectal, stylistic varieties. Thus, southerners' speech is a continuum, in which it is difficult to determine where French language ends and Occitan language begins and vice versa.

It seems essential to emphasize that in linguistic opposition between French and Occitan languages, French occupies a leading, dominant and prestigious position, while Occitan is a form of speech marked by provinciality and functional limitation. In addition to it, French language in its literary form tends to be homogeneous, while, as it was mentioned before, Occitan language in its dialectal form tends to be internally variant.

It is a matter of common observation that only a small number of Occitans spoke French language until the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, then throughout the XIX<sup>th</sup> century bilinguals' number gradually increased, but it led to so-called elitist bilingualism: French language was mainly spoken by Occitan society's selected part. Today, bilingualism in Occitania

is universal, since all Occitans speak both French and Occitan languages.

Although, Occitan language is spoken in everyday informal communication in a family, among friends, comrades, etc in the South of France, when communicating with strangers, Occitans prefer to speak French, even if the conversation concerns everyday topics. [Sauzet 1988: 224]

France's Southern inhabitants are aware that Occitan language does not fulfill important functions but French language does. They also know that the use of Occitan language is not obligatory for them, but they cannot do without French language. Occitan speakers also understand that their native language is far from French language in its current official state: it is poorly reflected in written speech and does not have a strict standard whereas French language has strict standard and is presented in books, newspapers, at school, on the radio, etc.

Nevertheless, Occitan speakers are very proud of their native language and find it aesthetically and expressively remarkable. Moreover, they consider it as their traditional culture's reflection and as a means of keeping cultural and ethnic identity distinct from French one.

### **Occitan Language's Main Features**

As far as main differences between Occitan and French languages are concerned, they developed at the very beginning of Roman speech varieties' formation period within a single Gallo-Roman language's framework.

In general terms, the following Occitan language's features currently exist:

❖ Occitan language's phonetic system in contrast to French language is characterized by: an open timbre of vowels; preservation of pre-stressed "e" and "q" as well as diphthongs "ai", "oi", "ou", "ue"; pronunciation of a consonant following a nasal vowel; sounding of the plural morpheme "-s". It allows us to conclude that final unstressed vowels' preservation causes a large number of words with stress on the penultimate syllable as well as a special rhythm of a phrase.

❖ The presence of fricative "b", apical "r", soft "l" brings Occitan language closer to the Ibero-Roman languages' family.

❖ In morphology, Occitan language is characterized by specific features of verb tenses' use as well as highly developed inflections in the verb system due to its personal pronoun's use is not necessary.

### **Occitan Language's Place in Roman Languages' Classification**

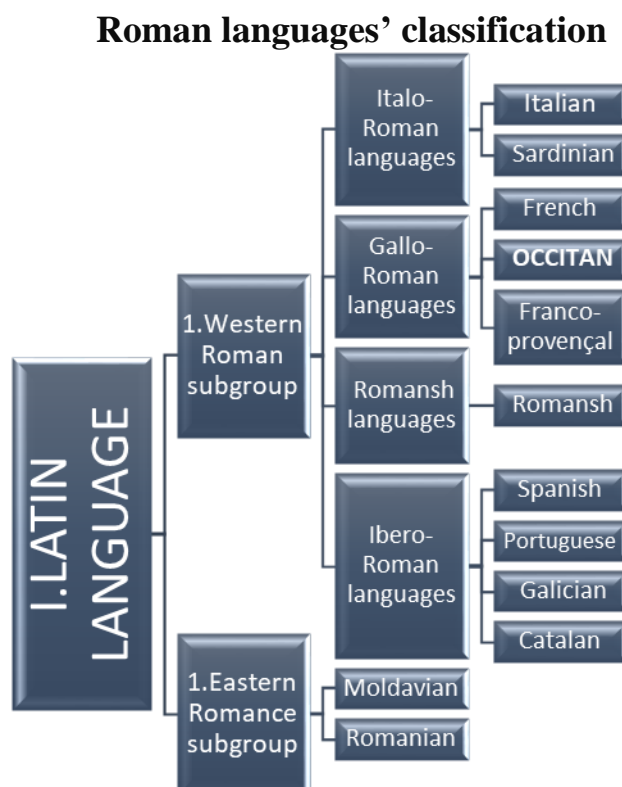
It is well-known fact that Roman languages are languages formed on Latin language's basis and retain Latin language's features in its composition, syntax and morphology.

Roman languages' classification changed depending on what grounds were accepted for this classification, therefore, different authors distinguish Roman languages' different number. It should be mentioned also that Latin language is also included in Roman languages' number.

The most important problem of Roman philology is Roman languages' formation process because it is necessary to take into account a wide variety of factors: from historical to intralinguistic and extralinguistic. When deciding on Roman language's origin, there are two main aspects: explanation of Roman languages' similarity and discovery of causes for its divergence. That is why Roman languages' group involves several subgroups.

The most common classification of Roman languages is classification based on territorial-linguistic criteria (see the scheme №1):

Scheme №1



Source: The scheme compiled by the author (Bestolkova G.V.).

As we can see, in this classification Occitan language is included in Gallo-Roman languages along with French, Franco-Provençal.

Although, there are other suggestions: according to Pierre Bec, there should be created Occitan-Roman languages' group involving Occitan and Catalan languages, since Catalan language and Occitan language's dialect (Gascon) share the same features with Ibero-Roman languages whereas Northern Occitan dialects have common features with French and Franco-Provençal languages and should be united in Gallo-Roman languages' group. [Bec 1963]

In addition to it, there is also a suggestion to form Central Western Roman languages' group involving Occitan, Catalan, Gallo-Italian languages while other Roman languages should be united in Ibero-Roman, Gallo-Roman, Italo-Roman and Rheto-Roman groups. [Lingüística Occitana [http](http://)]

It should be noted that Occitan language has complex dialectal structure that is

why sometimes it is transferred from language's category to language group's category by means of using the term "Occitan languages" (see the table №1):

Table №1

## Occitan Language's Dialectal Structure

ALPIN	AUVERGNAT	GASCON	LANGUE-DOCIEN	LIMOUSIN	RHODANIEN
<i>Aila la maison de mon paire es plena de varlets qu'an de pan, de vin, d'uòus e de fromatge tant coma ne'n vòlon.</i>	<i>Alai l'ostal de mon paire es plen demesatges qu'an de pan, de vin, de cacaus et de fromatge tant que ne'n vòlon.</i>	<i>Lahòra la maison de mon pair qu'es plea de vaillets qu'an pan, vin, uòus, fromatge tant que'n vòlon.</i>	<i>Enlà l'ostal del paire es plein de vaillets qu'aun de pan et de vin, d'uòus e du fromatge tant quene vòlon.</i>	<i>Alai la maison de mon pair es plena de vaslets qu'aun del pan e del vin, daus uòus e de la toma tant que ne vòlon.</i>	<i>Ailai l'ostau de mon paire es plein denharros qu'an de pan de vin d'uòus et de fromatge tant coma ne'n vòlon.</i>

Source: The table compiled on the basis of "Occitan language. Dictionary for beginners" // G.V. Bestolkova (<http://Linguistica Occitana>)

**Francitan or Français D'oc?**

Occitan and French languages' mixture in France led to new regiolects' emergence, such as *francitan* and *français d'oc*.

*Francitan* is regiolect formed with French language's strong influence on Occitan one in Southern regions of France. In other words, francitan derived from a mixture of French and Occitan languages: *francitan* = *français* + *occitan*.

*Français d'oc* is regiolect formed with Occitan language's strong influence on French one within Occitania. Just like in previous case, this regiolect came from a mixture of French and Occitan languages, but in contrast to *francitan*, it is called *français d'oc* = *occitan* + *français*.

Although both regiolects originated from a mixture of Occitan and French languages, each of them has its own features, for example, pronunciation of Occitan vowels' combination "au" in French manner as [ɔ] is a distinctive feature of *français d'oc*: the Occitan word "paume" (palm) is pronounced as the French word "pomme [pɔm]" (apple), whereas appearance of the verb "escagasser" [eskagase] derived from Occitan verb "escagassar" (annoy) in speech is a sign of the *francitan*: "Tu m'escagasse! = Tu m'énerves! / Tu m'a fatigué!" [Parlez-vous le sud? [http](http://)]

It should be noted that these regiolects' existence allows Occitan speakers to learn French language more easily as well as French speakers to learn Occitan language more easily and, as a consequence, it contributes to better understanding and communication among Francophones ana Occitanophones.

As we can see, French language increasingly penetrates into Occitan language's area and, as a result, regional variant becomes a norm capable of replacing state language's standard. According to Patrick Sauze, *français d'oc* is gradually winning and the *francitan* is retreating. [Sauzet 1988: 228] At the same time, there is strong interaction between *français d'oc* and *francitan* that can lead to formation a single creolized form of speech.



Having described these regiolects, we must conclude that this model to a certain extent illustrates language situation's general scheme development throughout France: French language being influenced with regional languages is transformed into a series of regiolects, while regional languages, such as Occitan, become more similar to French language. Thus, diglossia is formed in France: from French language to regional ones through their mutually assimilated transitional forms (francitan, français d'oc, etc.).

### Conclusion

Thus, after carrying out the descriptive analysis of Occitan language's features and its interactions with French language within France, it became possible to arrive at the following conclusion: there was not a linguistic conflict in this part of the French state, because Southern regions' population was not fully aware of Occitan language's independence and immersed the French language quite deeply into local linguistic and cultural landscape.

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