

# The languages of France

## What are we talking about? Definitions

A number of languages have always been spoken in France – a fact recognized by an article in the French Constitution – that “regional languages are part of the heritage of France.”

“The languages of France” refers not only to French, but to regional languages as well as minority languages – that have been spoken by French citizens within the borders of France long enough to count as part of the country’s cultural heritage, without being the official language of any state.

### Regional languages

Regional languages are languages that have been spoken in some parts of the country longer than French.

### Non-territorial languages

This refers to languages associated with immigration, but long in use by significant numbers of French people. They include in particular dialects of Arabic, western Armenian, Berber, Judeo-Spanish, Romani and Yiddish. In addition to these, there is LSF or French sign language. To be recognized as “languages of France”, these non-territorial languages must not have any official status in any other country.

### Transmission

According to the 1999 census, 26% of adults living in France learned a language other than French from their parents (often at the same time as French). In half of these cases, the languages concerned

are regional; the other half are languages of immigrants. Scarcely 35% of these adults have passed this second language on to their own children: the languages of France are only rarely transmitted through families today.

Transmission of these languages now depends primarily on formal teaching, on their cultural vitality, and on their presence in the media.

### Teaching

Over 400,000 students receive instruction in regional languages through either public or private-sector institutions. Altogether, 70% are in primary schools, 24% in collèges (the first four years of secondary school) and 6% in lycées (the last three years of secondary education).

Public-sector teaching of regional languages and cultures takes two forms. In the first, the regional language is taught as a separate

subject. In the second, teaching is bilingual, with half in French and the other half in the regional language. Target levels for primary schooling are defined on the basis of the common European framework for language.

Bi-lingual teaching is also provided through immersion programmes organized by associations that include Diwan for Breton, Seaska for Basque, Calandretas for Occitan and Bressola for Catalan.

The tendency is for teaching to be organized on the basis of agreements between the State and local and regional government.

### Media

**Press:** Publications in regional languages enjoy the same advantages as those in French, including reduced tax and postal charges, targeted assistance for regional weeklies, etc.

**Radio and TV:** Public broadcasters support, where appropriate, the use of regional languages. Compliance is very uneven, with the use of regional languages ranging from a few minutes to several hours a day, depending on the language, the broadcaster and on whether programmes are on radio or TV.

Every day, several hundred programmes in some dozen regional languages are broadcast in France, particularly in the overseas *départements*.

### Cultural policy

The French State emphasises the cultural potential of regional languages. This policy is pursued in association with organizations that also enjoy the support of local and regional government. Research is a major priority. The *Corpus de la Parole* site offers

on-line access to unique sound archives in the various languages spoken in France.

Through its action in favour of the languages that are part of France’s cultural heritage, the State contributes to the development of multicultural attitudes in France.

The State provides support for publications, theatrical and audiovisual work and the many festivals embodying the dynamism of the languages of France.

### In the public domain

Some of the options available within the legal framework to promote the languages of France are not widely used. For example: it is possible to publish all official documents issued by a public authority in any of these languages, provided there is a French

version, which alone has legal force. In other words, a marriage can be celebrated in Basque, Breton or Creole.

It is in the general interest of all French people to have access to their shared cultural and historical heritage through the presence of these languages in the public domain.

Bilingual signage and place names give significant public visibility to regional languages.



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