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Stewart McCain. *The Language Question under Napoleon*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography and index. xv + 307 pp. \$109.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-3-319-54935-4.

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In publishing *The Language Question under Napoleon*, one of my aims was to encourage scholars of the longer history of French language politics to think about the place of the Napoleonic regime in their narratives. To judge by Paul Cohen's detailed and erudite review of my work, the book has met this objective. I would like to thank Professor Cohen for the many kind things that he has to say about my book, as well as for the suggestive links to wider scholarship on the history of French language policy and nationalism that he draws. However, I also think that some important differences in approach and interpretation underpin Professor Cohen's critique of my work, and I am grateful to the editors of *H-France Review* for the opportunity to draw readers' attention to some of these differences.

When I began working on this subject, I was impressed by the contribution of cultural historians to the study of language during the revolutionary period. To take a non-exhaustive sample; the seminal work of Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel, and two excellent and thought-provoking books, by David A. Bell and Sophia Rosenfeld, all suggest the importance of language as a subject in different ways.[1] Taken together, and at risk of doing an injustice to the complexity of these books, this work shows how contemporary concerns about linguistic diversity, and in particular about its impact on political unity, was greatly significant in the construction of a "pedagogical" political culture during the Revolution--one concerned with the "regeneration" of the French nation.

To move this study of language into the Napoleonic period appeared a natural progression to me. After all, the conquests of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars meant the Napoleonic state confronted far greater degrees of linguistic diversity. Moreover, scholars such as Stuart Woolf and Michael Broers have insisted on the far-reaching nature of the Napoleonic project. In the words of the former, the problem of "civilization," and specifically how to spread the "French" one, was central to Napoleonic imperialism, while the latter has argued that the regime was engaged in full-blown cultural imperialism.[2] The issue of language, then, appeared to offer promising ground for a case study in Napoleonic cultural imperialism, not least since relatively little had been written about the subject.

However, while work on Revolutionary political culture offered important and wide-ranging conclusions, it also struck me that some important questions were left unanswered by approaches that privileged the close reading of printed texts. In historical literature, we perhaps rely too much on those who write about language as an idea, without considering the everyday realities and accommodations which shaped the experiences of Napoleonic citizens and the exercise of imperial power.[3] While it was fairly clear how and why linguistic diversity found itself the object of various schemes aimed at cultural unification, the actual implementation of such plans was less well-studied. I decided to focus on an examination of linguistic strategies and practices employed by those who staffed four institutions--the school, the army, the legal system, and the church. My hope was that by focusing on linguistic practice as it developed within the institutions of the Napoleonic state, I would be able to make a more detailed assessment of the place of language in other historical questions relating to the Napoleonic period--not least the nature of Napoleonic imperialism in practice and the relationship of elites to the Napoleonic regime.

Professor Cohen is right to observe that my book does not contain a fully worked out "cultural and intellectual history of the idea of French as national and official language" during the period. This would have been a different book from the one I set out to write. I would make no claims to offer a systematic or definitive treatment of these questions, even if historians carrying out this kind of project might find useful material in my work. What I instead aimed to do was examine the linguistic situation on the ground, focusing primarily on the practical and political challenges of administering a multilingual empire.

As I sought to argue in my book, it was these political and administrative realities, rather than a given set of ideas or visions of linguistic order, that determined the policies adopted by the regime in relation to language. I do think that linguistic imperialism, or *francisation* as contemporaries referred to it, was a part of the Napoleonic regime's state-building projects. On this, the direction was set from the top. Napoleon himself wrote on several occasions of the need to spread French in the annexed departments, with linguistic unity viewed as a means of securing political unity. In his words, the aim in relation to territories like the Rhineland was to "better attach the inhabitants to the *patrie*, and to introduce there the French language and *esprit*." [4] Yet the Napoleonic polity expanded dramatically between 1799 and 1814. My work considers only the territories directly annexed to France--the satellite kingdoms were a different case--but by 1812 the original 83 departments of France had swollen to 130, and the regime's approach to language changed over the course of these successive annexations. The legal system provides a useful example. The regime imposed French as the language of legal practice on the *départements réunis* of Belgium and the Rhineland, as well as on the departments of Piedmont that were annexed in 1802. The same principle was applied to the departments formed from Liguria and Parma, annexed between 1805 and 1808, although the regime was obliged to grant several delays to allow local officials to accommodate to the change. By the annexation of the Papal States, Tuscany and the Netherlands (from 1809 onwards), the Regime had changed tack, allowing Dutch, Italian and German to be used in the legal systems of these areas alongside French. Similar measures were to be implemented in the abortive annexation of the Catalan departments, with Catalan to be preferred to Castilian on the advice of Joseph-Marie Degérando, the Napoleonic official sent to the region to erect the administrative and legal apparatus. [5]

How should we explain these different approaches to language? In his review, Professor Cohen suggests that this might be understood as "an explicit and self-conscious acknowledgement that the Imperial polity was- and was destined to remain- a multilingual community." Here I think

there is perhaps a greater degree of commonality between our interpretations than Cohen allows. As I argue in my conclusion, "the later annexations carried out by the Napoleonic state reveal a degree of flexibility over competing priorities," with the regime obliged to "bow to the inevitable" over language.[6]

However, Cohen goes further than this. He cites the 1809 decree authorising the use of Italian in Tuscany and establishing prizes for works contributing to preserving the purity of the language, an effort considered "*important for the glory of the Empire*" [Cohen's italics]. The implication appears to be that decisions to allow Italian to function as an official language in Tuscany should be understood as the result of an imperial vision that saw linguistic diversity as a marker of the power of the regime. For sure, the idea that a uniquely "pure" variety of Italian was spoken in Tuscany did seem to reflect scientific concern for the progress of European letters. However, with a regime so keenly interested in achieving stability by winning the support of elites--the famous *masses de granite*--we should also consider the propaganda value of terms such as "glory" and "purity" in what was a published decree.[7] Not only was the move recognised by contemporaries as a departure from established principles, it was perceived as little more than an attempt to curry favour on the part of the regime by some Italian men of letters during the period.[8] It was also in this somewhat cynical mode that Degérando justified his 1812 recommendation to make Catalan an official language in the four annexed Catalan departments. He considered it a way to encourage loyalty from Catalan elites he imagined would thank the French for delivering them from Castilian domination. For Degérando, this was also an "easy give" for the regime; he expected Catalan to die out anyway.[9] These examples serve to illustrate the broader point. Napoleonic officials often seemed more concerned with the practical realities of governing with local elites than in grand theorizing about language.

In general, the situation in the "old" departments of France differed markedly from those annexed during the period. Here, multilingual elites communicated in both the local dialect and standardised French. In the absence of legal elites trained to practice in a different language, regulations explicitly stipulating which languages were to be used clearly seemed less necessary. Instead, the local dialect was widely used in courtrooms. In Professor Cohen's telling, this simply built upon the Old Regime model of juridical translations, which held Romance languages such as Occitan were so closely related to French that translators were not needed. Cohen also suggests that, for this reason, I am mistaken to claim that courts risked having their judgements overturned by eschewing translators. Admittedly, I'm not that familiar with Old Regime judicial procedure. However, judgements were in fact brought before, and overturned by, the *cour de cassation* in Paris, because of failures by the court to appoint a translator for speakers of Romance dialects.[10] After its publication, the dispositions of the 1808 code of criminal procedures governed decisions in this area, rather than the 1670 royal ordonnance. The 1808 code's dispositions held simply that the requirement to appoint a translator rested on the mutual intelligibility of witness, accused, and members of the jury. If an accused claimed not to understand a witness statement made in dialect, and the judge did not correctly appoint an official translator, then the verdict was opened up to challenge on appeal. During the process of drawing up the 1808 code, jurists across Romance-speaking France argued against measures that would have indirectly made linguistic practices inherited from the Old Regime difficult, if not impossible, but they based their arguments on the efficient administration of the legal system, rather than precedent.[11]

For the Napoleonic regime, the language question in much of "Old France" concerned social improvement rather than fears of linguistic separatism. Napoleonic officials saw improvement (*l'amélioration*) as an important goal of good administration. This involved spreading grammatically correct French, contrasted with "impure" and "corrupt" dialect, to the general population. The spread of correct French, it was presumed, would facilitate the enlightenment of the people and, in turn, the improvement of agriculture, commerce and social life. [12]

Here the interpretation of the enquiry into language conducted through the *Bureau de la statistique* is relevant. This is a remarkably rich source about which much can be said. I would certainly encourage interested readers to also consult Sven Ködel's study, which is much more detailed in its discussion than the sections in my book. [13]

There can be no denying, as Professor Cohen observes, that this enquiry ended up a somewhat antiquarian enterprise. Many local elites and scholars did hold positive views of local languages they themselves often spoke informally. One can detect a romantic nostalgia for local cultures and languages in the writings of many who corresponded with the Coqueberts, even amongst those who served as administrators within the prefectural system. In this sense, I do not disagree with Professor Cohen's observation that some "learned elites [...] embraced a socially stratified plurality of tongues." Indeed, I have sought to make very similar arguments, in my book and elsewhere. [14]

That being said, we should not lose sight of the unequal dynamics of power that surrounded linguistic diversity during the period, and I would wish to append one or two qualifications. Firstly, the Coqueberts' enquiry turned on many of the same ideas about popular speech that underpinned Grégoire's enquiry of the previous decade. The "patois," they held, were impure and corrupt, spoken by poor and remote rural dwellers. Many scholars during the period studied—and mourned—local languages and cultures for their value as heritage, because they assumed their destruction was inevitable. [15] Others described how their "patois" evoked memories of childhood, or claimed it was easier to crack jokes in than French. This challenges the idea that French invariably thought of other oral languages as an encumbrance to progress to be displaced by French. It also underscores the polyglot nature of local elites. All of this is important for the linguistic policies and practices of the state—a point I hope readers will take from my book. At the same time these ideas also reinforced the distinction between the high prestige of French, the language of literate culture and officialdom, and the low prestige of other, predominantly oral, languages spoken across France.

The views of Charles Étienne Coquebert de Montbret underscore the point. In an essay published in 1831, Coquebert expressed doubt about the ability of the state to achieve linguistic unity through "administrative methods and coercion." The "annihilation of the patois" was not as close as some might think, and state-driven attempts to regulate linguistic practice invariably stoked political opposition. Coquebert referred to what he took to be the impact of William I's pro-Dutch linguistic policy in Belgium following the 1830 Revolution, as well as Joseph II's abortive reforms in Hungary. Yet Coquebert did not suggest that language shift in France was not desirable, or that it was not possible. In his words, "we can only hope [for the annihilation of the patois and dialects] with the passage of time, the progress of primary education, and the slow, but assured, influence of imitation." [16] Scholars may have embraced linguistic plurality, but only within the limits of a clear delineation of informal, low-status interactions from the fields of high-status francophone communication, and on the widespread assumption that linguistic diversity was on the decline.

More generally, I would suggest that the ideas held by figures like the Coqueberts are only one part of the story. I would certainly not seek to minimise the contributions of cultural or intellectual approaches to the history of language. However, to privilege such approaches to the exclusion of the often complex accommodations and conflicts that characterised the linguistic practice of historical actors would leave us with only a very partial understanding of the issue, and in my view this really would be a missed opportunity.

## NOTES

[1] Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel, *Une Politique de la langue : La Révolution française et les patois : l'enquête de Grégoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001); Sophia Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[2] Stuart J. Woolf, "French Civilization and Ethnicity in the Napoleonic Empire," *Past and Present* 124/1(1989): 96-120; Michael Broers, *The Napoleonic Empire in Italy, 1796-1814: Cultural Imperialism in a European Context?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005).

[3] For a later period, Eugen Weber was certainly attuned to these questions, and Jean-François Chanet offers a compelling study of the school teachers of the Third Republic. Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979); Jean-François Chanet, *L'École républicaine et les petites patries* (Paris: Aubier, 1996).

[4] Napoléon Bonaparte, *Correspondance générale* 15 vols. (Paris: Fayard, 2002-2018). See entries 7166 (Napoléon au Général Berthier, Malmaison, 30 fructidor an X [17 Sept. 1804]) and 9032 (Napoléon à Garat, Pont-de-Briques, 8 thermidor an XII [27 Jul. 1804]). See also, McCain, *The Language Question*, p. 157.

[5] Michael Broers, "La mission de Joseph-Marie Degérando en Haute-Catalogne en 1812 : La loi universelle de l'empire et la dernière réunion," *Napoléon, Bayonne et l'Espagne: Actes du colloque organisé par la société des sciences, lettres et arts à l'occasion du bicentenaire de l'entrevue de Bayonne* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011), pp. 245-247.

[6] McCain, *The Language Question under Napoleon*, p. 272.

[7] Louis Bergeron and Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Les masses de granit: cent-mille notables du Premier-Empire* (Paris: Éditions de l'école des hautes études en science sociale, 1979).

[8] On this see the recent work on Italy by Elisa Baccini, "L'Empire français et la langue italienne : le débat sur la langue et les conséquences de l'époque napoléonienne en Italie," *La Révolution française* 16(2019). <http://journals.openedition.org/lrf/2680>. (accessed 15 July 2019).

[9] Broers, "La mission de Joseph-Marie Degérando en Haute-Catalogne en 1812 : La loi universelle de l'empire et la dernière réunion," pp. 245-247.

[10] According to article 332 of the 1808 code of criminal procedures, which remained in force in France until 1958, the court was required to appoint a translator when the accused spoke a different language to one or more of the witnesses. Two judgements were quashed on appeal during the nineteenth century, demonstrating that the requirements of the 1808 code could apply to the Romance dialects of France. In February 1812, a judgement by the *Cour de Cassation* established that a translator had to be appointed by the court if the accused declared he did not understand the of a witness, even if the accused was satisfied with the judge's translation. In 1853, a judgement was overturned because another witness (the mayor of Valdoie, just north of Belfort where a Romance *langue d'oïl* dialect was spoken) was appointed to translate for a witness who "spoke only patois." Articles 407 and 408 held that the translator could not be a witness, judge or jury involved in the trial. In 1851, Laurent Gothland appealed against a guilty verdict handed down by the *cour d'assises* of the Charente on the basis that a witness deposition had been made in the *patois périgourdin*, with cross-examination in both French and Patois-- both of which the judge was familiar with. The appeal was thrown out on the basis that the witness had sworn his oath in French (and therefore, presumably, understood the language), both witness and accused were from the same village, where the language was commonly spoken, and most damningly, no one (on the jury or the accused) had claimed not to understand during the trial itself. Other appeals on similar issues during the period show that the issue was a live one. *Table Alphabétique, par ordre de matières, de tous les arrêts rapportés dans la partie criminelle du bulletin officiel de la cour de cassation, depuis 1798 inclusivement jusqu'à 1823* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1823), pp. 315-316; *Bulletin des arrêts de la cour de Cassation rendue en matière criminelle*, t. 56, no. 1 (1851), pp. 63-64; *Bulletin des arrêts de la Cour de Cassation rendue en matière criminelle* t. 58, no. 12 (1853), pp. 723-724.

[11] McCain, *The Language Question*, chapter five.

[12] McCain, *The Language Question*, pp. 34-41.

[13] Sven Ködel, *Die Enquete Coquebert de Montbret (1806-1812). Die Sprachen und Dialekte Frankreichs und die Wahrnehmung der französischen Sprachlandschaft während des Ersten Kaiserreichs* (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2014). I would like to apologise to Dr Ködel for the oversight in not citing his study, which only came to my attention after I had submitted my manuscript to the publisher.

[14] McCain, *The Language Question*, pp. 84-93, 275; Stewart McCain, "Speaking like a State? Cultural Imperialism, Linguistic Particularism and Local Officials in the Napoleonic Enquiry into the Patois, 1806-1812," *French History* 29/4(2015), pp. 510-529.

[15] On this argument, see Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel, "La beauté du mort," in Michel de Certeau, *La culture au pluriel* (Paris: Union général des éditions, 1974).

[16] Charles-Étienne Coquebert de Montbret, "Essai d'un travail sur la géographie de la langue française," in Sébastien Bottin, ed., *Mélanges sur les langues, dialectes et patois* (Paris: Au bureau de l'almanach du commerce, 1831), pp. 22-23. This work has often been attributed to his son, Eugène. On its authorship, see Isabelle Laboulais-Lesage, *Lectures et pratiques de l'espace: L'itinéraire de Coquebert de Montbret, savant et grand commis d'Etat (1755-1831)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999), p. 451.

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