

Perceptions of Germanic minority languages in France: contrasting Alsatian and Western Flemish

France is home to a variety of regional languages, all of which have minority status in the country and enjoy varying levels of recognition. While some languages have a certain amount of prestige (e.g., Breton, Basque), others are looked down upon and are associated with negative stereotypes (e.g., Picard, Franco-Provençal). Interestingly, regional languages with less prestige tend to belong to the same immediate language family as Standard French, the Oïl branch of Gallo-Romance (Lefebvre 1988), while those with more prestige belong to more distant language branches. In theory, this situation should favor France's Germanic minority languages, Alsatian and Western Flemish, which are much more distantly related to Standard French than Gallo-Romance languages. This study aims to test that assumption, guided by the following questions: does perceived distance from French affect French speakers' attitudes toward Alsatian and Western Flemish? Regardless of the outcome, what kinds of motivations might be underlying the result?

Given these questions, two surveys were used to investigate the relationship between attitudes toward France's regional languages and their perceived linguistic distance from Standard French. First, 100 native French speakers from Metropolitan France listened to recordings of 12 regional languages (among them Alsatian and Western Flemish), and then ranked those languages according to their proximity to Standard French. They also provided adjectives to describe each recording. In a second survey, another group of 100 French speakers evaluated the same recordings on a series of 7-point semantic differential scales, which juxtaposed the following pairs of adjectives based on those provided by the first group of speakers: *beautiful-ugly*, *pleasant-unpleasant*, *elegant-inelegant*, *correct-incorrect*, *normal-strange* and *familiar-formal*. Mixed-effects linear regression confirmed that perceived distance from French has a statistically significant effect on speaker attitudes: French speakers view regional languages more favorably when they perceive them as distinct from French. The data from all 12 languages produce an insightful context for the interpretation of the Germanic varieties.

The results for Alsatian and Western Flemish are striking in that they pattern very differently on both the language distance and attitudes dimensions. In regard to perceived distance from Standard French, Alsatian is ranked the furthest from French out of all the regional languages, whereas Western Flemish is seen as the closest non-Gallo-Romance language to French. Concerning attitudes, Alsatian is rated more positively than all the Gallo-Romance languages, but it is otherwise outranked. In contrast, Western Flemish is rated the most negatively out of all 12 regional languages. The adjectives given by the first group of speakers to describe the recordings offer some insight into their thought process, implying that the differing results for the two languages could have phonological and/or sociolinguistic explanations. For example, Western Flemish lacks the velar fricatives /x/ and /ɣ/, which may cause it to sound less Germanic to French speakers than Alsatian (which features the marked /x/ characteristic of German). Sociolinguistically, the level of standardization for each language may also play a role: Alsatian has a significant presence in both education and media, whereas Western Flemish does not and thus may be more susceptible to contact-induced change via French. On the whole, the results of this study have implications for the revitalization of minority languages in France and around the world, and they help to explain the difference in public and institutional support for Alsatian and Western Flemish.

References

Lefebvre, A. 1988. Les langues du domaine d'oïl, des langues trop proches. In G. Vermes (ed.), *Vingt-cinq communautés linguistiques de la France*. Paris: Harmattan.