

# Spaces of Use of the Occitan Language in Périgord

Adrian Gorke

University of Bordeaux, Nouvelle-Aquitaine, France

Email: [adrian.gorke@u-bordeaux.fr](mailto:adrian.gorke@u-bordeaux.fr)

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## Abstract

The fact that the Occitan area does not constitute an officially established political or administrative entity contributes to the status of a dominated language to which Occitan is relegated, in the same way as the other regional languages existing on French territory and is reflected in a constantly declining number of speakers. By identifying its main areas of use, the article attempts to determine the place of Occitan in everyday life in Périgord, in an area divided almost equally between North Occitan and Southern Occitan. It has to be said that the decline in the use of Occitan in the private-public sphere contrasts with a strong prosperity in the cultural and virtual sphere. The result is the appropriation of the new media and modern means of communication by the Occitan language, which certainly helps to make the younger generation aware of the importance of maintaining it but does not guarantee a positive impact on the number of Occitan speakers in the long term.

## Keywords

Occitan, Perigord, Vitality, Maintenance, Spaces of Use

## 1. Introduction

The Occitan language is in danger. Unesco's Atlas<sup>1</sup> of the World's Languages in Danger lists not only Occitan as a language as a whole, but also its most important dialectal groups.

Although there are no reliable figures for the number of Occitan speakers, with estimates ranging from 500,000 to several million<sup>2</sup>, the research literature

<sup>1</sup>Atlas des langues en danger dans le monde—UNESCO Bibliothèque Numérique.

<sup>2</sup>In 2009, the Occitan newspaper *Lugarn* counted at least 14.5 million speakers, while *Kremnitz* (1981: p. 74) or *Bossong* (2008: p. 131) speak of at least 600,000 and no more than 1.5 million speakers.

also points to a sharp decline in the number of speakers, e.g. Bistolfi (2004: p. 175), who states that the number of Occitan speakers is constantly falling, or Dourdet (2020: p. 2), who argues that Occitan is now considered to be “seriously endangered”<sup>3</sup>.

However, if the figures are to be believed, this is not a danger affecting the entire Occitan-speaking area.

The Occitan enclaves of the Val d’Aran, the *Valadas Occitanas*<sup>4</sup> in the Piemontese Alps and the linguistic island in Calabria, the Guardia Piemontese, for example, despite their small number of inhabitants, have a much more encouraging rate of Occitan speakers<sup>5</sup>, which is due in part to their particular geographical situation.

This article focuses on Occitan in Périgord, which, although it cannot claim the status of an enclave, nevertheless presents an interesting geolinguistic situation, as it is located almost equally on two Occitan dialectal areas, Limousin and Nord-Languedocien. This particular geographical position feeds the hope that the Périgord is exempt from the decline in the number of Occitan speakers affecting the hexagonal Occitan-speaking area and is illustrated by a much more encouraging rate of speakers.

The aim of this article is therefore firstly to outline the vitality of Occitan in Périgord, then to identify the areas where Occitan is spoken in Périgord and to suggest ways in which the practice of Occitan in Périgord can be ensured continuity and sustainability.

In order to respond conclusively to the above objectives, the article is divided into several stages.

Firstly, a brief historical, geographical and linguistic description of Occitan in Périgord will be given in order to define the subject of the study. This will be followed by a review of the vitality of Occitan in Périgord, based on figures from sociolinguistic surveys carried out over the last twenty years, and a description of the main areas where Occitan is spoken in Périgord. This will be followed by a discussion of the measures that need to be taken to ensure the continued use of Occitan in Périgord.

## 2. The Place of the Occitan Language Nowadays in France

Even if there is no official recognition and France makes of its alleged monolingualism, deeply anchored in its constitution through article 2 of its constitution “the language of the Republic is French”<sup>6</sup>, the cement of its cohesion and its na-

<sup>3</sup>Original citation: “comme sérieusement en danger”.

<sup>4</sup>Pla-Lang (2008).

<sup>5</sup>In Val d’Aran the percentage of Occitan speakers is 62%, according to the 2020 sociolinguistic survey carried out for the Guardia Piemontese. Toso (2008: p. 141) notes that out of 1860 inhabitants there are 340 speakers of the local Occitan dialect known as “gardiol”, giving a rate of 18%. According to Allansino, Ferrier, Scamuzzi, & Telmon (2007: p. 71), out of a population estimated at 174,476 in the *valadas occitanas* in 2013, 47,000 have an active command of the language and 21,000 a passive command, giving a rate of 27% and 12% respectively.

<sup>6</sup>Original citation: “la langue de la République est le français”.

tional identity<sup>7</sup>, it hosts on its territory “so-called regional” languages, including Occitan, which covers the southern third of mainland France and which is also found in Italy and Spain in the form of Occitan enclaves: the *Val d’Aran* in the Spanish Pyrenees, the *Valadas Occitanas*<sup>8</sup> of the Piedmontese Alps as well as a linguistic island in Calabria, the *Guardia Piemontese*.



Source: Langues régionales (culture.gouv.fr).

The term “regional” used on the map above distributed by the French government, clearly opposes the national and official character of the French language and translates at the highest institutional level, the subordinate character of these languages towards French.

Even if following a constitutional modification in 2008, article 75-1 provides that “regional languages belong to the heritage of France”<sup>9</sup>, they do not benefit from any official status, which results in the refusal of the French Senate, on October 27, 2015, to sign the draft constitutional law leading to the ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages proposed by the

<sup>7</sup>Gadet (2006: p. 1787): “Nevertheless, this idea of a homogeneity persists on social and cultural grounds, and the language is seen as an important identity factor.”

<sup>8</sup>Pla-Lang (2008).

<sup>9</sup>Original citation: “les langues régionales appartiennent au patrimoine de la France”.

Council of Europe, adopted by its partner assembly in 1992 and signed initially by the France in 1999<sup>10</sup>.

The recent “loi Molac”, a law relating to the heritage protection of regional languages and their promotion, providing among other things for a generalization of the teaching of regional languages as an optional subject within the framework of the normal teaching timetable, from kindergarten to high school<sup>11</sup>, has not considerably changed the status that the French State grants to regional languages, in particular due to the modifications made there by the Constitutional Council on May 21, 2021, aimed at immersive teaching in a language other than the French, considered contrary to the Constitution and its article 2 “the language of the republic is French.”

### 3. What Is Occitan from the Périgord?

In order to define the subject of our study, we will first outline a few historical and geographical aspects, and then describe the linguistic aspect.

The territory of Périgord is that of the Dordogne department, located in the south-west of mainland France. These geographical correspondences do not apply to the name of the territory in question, whose history, rich in twists and turns, began in the Palaeolithic era, when the oldest human presence attested in Périgord dates back some 400,000 years ago<sup>12</sup>.

The area in question saw other human civilisations pass through over the following millennia, including the Gallic civilisation or, more precisely, the Gallic people of the Petrocorians<sup>13</sup>, “who occupied a fairly vast territory that has since been known as Périgord”<sup>14</sup>.

However, after suffering defeat at Alesia under the banner of Vercingetorix against the Roman troops, the Petrocorians soon had to come to terms with the domination of the Roman victors and “Périgord was incorporated into the vast province of Aquitaine, which then included all the countries between the Loire and the Pyrenees”<sup>15</sup>.

Following the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 AD, brought about by the Visigoths, Périgord went through some turbulent times. Over the centuries, it was part of a Visigoth kingdom for nearly a hundred years, suffered 50 years of plundering by the Normans in the 9th century, became a county with the divi-

<sup>10</sup>Rojas-Hutinel (2016).

<sup>11</sup>Légifrance: LOI n° 2021-641 du 21 mai 2021 relative à la protection patrimoniale des langues régionales et à leur promotion (1)—Légifrance (legifrance.gouv.fr).

<sup>12</sup>Fourment & Hiriart (2022: p. 16).

<sup>13</sup>Fourment & Hiriart (2022: p. 52): “Pétrocores”, such is the name of the Celtic people who occupied—broadly speaking—the current department of Dordogne. From this ethnonym come the names of Périgord and Périgueux. The Gallic term Petrocores (Petrocorii) would translate as “the four troops” (petro-: four; corii: armies, groups, troops), which could provide information on the existence of four specific territorial entities.”

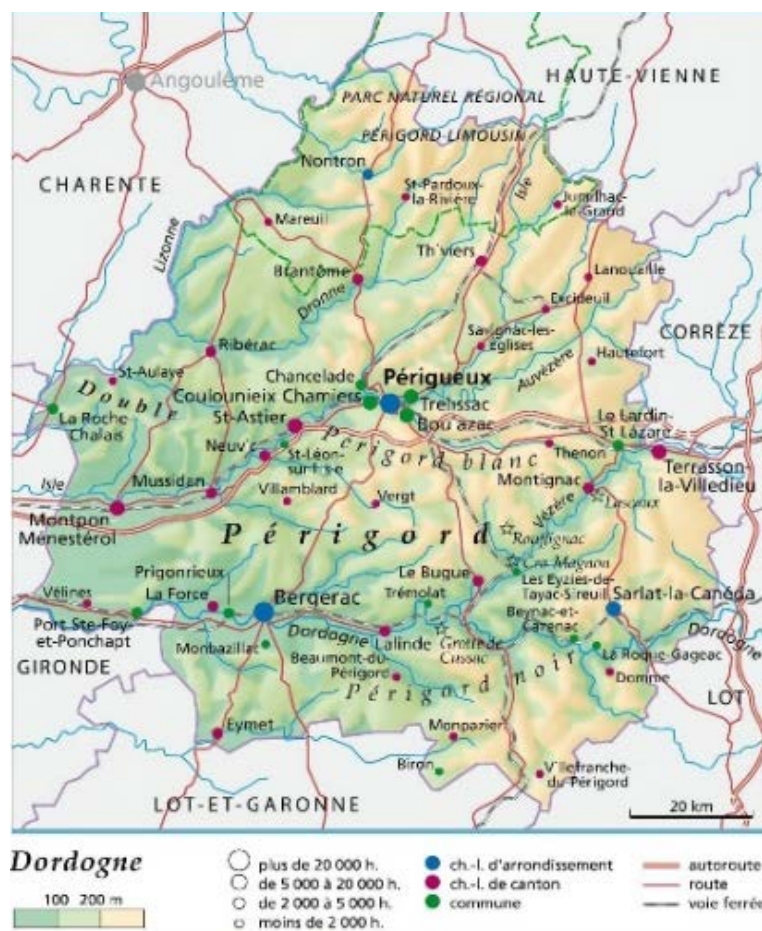
<sup>14</sup>Dubet & Cassagnac (1943: p. 10) original citation: “qui occupaient un territoire assez vaste que l’on a désigné depuis sous le nom de Périgord.”

<sup>15</sup>Dubet & Cassagnac (1943: p. 10) original citation: “le Périgord fut incorporé à la vaste province d’Aquitaine qui comprenait alors tous les pays situés entre la Loire et les Pyrénées.”

sion of Charlemagne's immense empire, came under English sovereignty in 1360 with the Treaty of Brétigny, and then hosted the great victory of Lamothe-Montravel in 1453, which sealed the expulsion of the English from French soil<sup>16</sup>.

By decree of 26 February 1790, the National Assembly abolished the provinces and created the départements, including the Dordogne. It was given the territory of the former Périgord, plus a small part of the Agenais and Angoumois regions<sup>17</sup>, giving rise to a geographical area that is still the law today.

Note that the map below contains both names: Périgord on the map and Dordogne below. The use of both names can be explained by the fact that Dordogne is used for administrative purposes, while Périgord has a more emotional dimension, because it is attached to the heritage, culture and language of the area: "Today, this area is the department of Dordogne, inherited from the old Périgord, whose name is still preferred when it comes to celebrating its heritage!"<sup>18</sup>.



Source: Dordogne—Média LAROUSSE.

<sup>16</sup>Dubet & Cassagnac (1943: pp. 12-20).

<sup>17</sup>Dubet & Cassagnac (1943: p. 29).

<sup>18</sup>Combet & Lachaise (2022: p. 6) original citation: "Ce territoire, c'est celui aujourd'hui du département de la Dordogne, hérité de l'ancien Périgord dont le nom lui est toujours et encore préféré lorsqu'il s'agit de célébrer son patrimoine."



The Occitan spoken in Périgord is not a dialect of Occitan in itself, but straddles two dialectal areas of Occitan: Limousin to the north and Languedocien to the south.

Even if schematically “we could consider that the Dordogne valley is the axis of this transition. On the left bank the Languedocien dies, on the right bank the Limousin dies. It’s obviously not that simple. There is a progressive border.”<sup>19</sup>.

This linguistic border crosses Périgord from west to east, describing a line “passing approximately between Villefranche-de-Lonchat and Montpeyroux, Saint-Rémy and Saint-Médard-de-Gurçon, les Lèches and Lunas, Villamblard and Montagnac, Vergt and Saint-Michel, La Douze and Mauzens, Rouffignac and Les Eyzies, Montignac and La Chapelle Aubareil, Nadaillac and Salignac” and it should be noted that this is not “a clear-cut boundary, but an area where usage often hesitates between northern and southern forms.”<sup>20</sup>.

The dialectal change may often be due to a watercourse, a forest or a sparsely inhabited area, and it may be that speakers living close to the dividing line speak a variety of Occitan borrowed from both dialects<sup>21</sup>.

Opinions regarding the linguistic unity of the dialectal varieties of Occitan in the Périgord region and their intercomprehension are not unanimous.

While Reydy (2008: p. 5) describes the dialectal differences as sufficiently marked that Périgourdins from the north and south cannot understand each other properly<sup>22</sup>, Leveque (2015: p. 34) considers that these differences are often overestimated by speakers and adds that “with practice, there is nothing to prevent a person from Nontronnais from conversing with a person from Sarlat”<sup>23</sup>.

These different estimates testify to a perceptible dialectal fragmentation below the separation into northern Occitan and southern Occitan. This is a natural phenomenon in an area as vast as the Périgord and is common to all languages that have not undergone a process of standardization<sup>24</sup>.

As far as the Limousin dialect is concerned, Leveque (2015: p. 36) distinguishes four main dialects: *Nontronnais*, *Ribéracois*, *Périgourdin* and *Bas-Limousin*, making up a linguistic area corresponding to the *Lemosin Peiregordin*

<sup>19</sup>Stéphan (2013: p. 9) original citation: “on pourrait considérer que la vallée de la Dordogne est l’axe de cette transition. Rive gauche vient mourir le languedocien, rive droite vient mourir le limousin. Ce n’est évidemment pas aussi simple. Il y a une frontière progressive.”

<sup>20</sup>Stéphan (2013: p. 9) original citation: “passant approximativement entre Villefranche-de-Lonchat et Montpeyroux, Saint-Rémy et Saint-Médard-de-Gurçon, les Lèches et Lunas, Villamblard et Montagnac, Vergt et Saint-Michel, La Douze et Mauzens, Rouffignac et Les Eyzies, Montignac et La Chapelle Aubareil, Nadaillac et Salignac” et il faut faire remarquer qu’il ne s’agit pas “d’une limite tranchée, mais d’une zone où l’usage hésite souvent entre formes du nord et du sud.”

<sup>21</sup>Leveque (2015: p. 33).

<sup>22</sup>Reydy (2008: p. 5): original citation “Les différences dialectales sont assez marquées pour que des Périgourdins du nord et du sud du département, que les malheurs de la vie ont parfois réunis à l’hôpital de Périgueux aient été obligés de recourir au français pour se comprendre [...]” English translation: The dialectal differences are sufficiently marked that Périgourdins from the north and south of the department, whom the misfortunes of life have sometimes brought together at the Périgueux hospital, have been obliged to resort to French to understand each other [...].

<sup>23</sup>Leveque (2015: p. 34) original citation: “avec l’habitude, rien n’empêche un nontronnais de converser avec un sarladais.”

<sup>24</sup>Leveque (2015: p. 36).

distinguished by Sumien (2009: p. 13) among the sub-dialects of Limousin.

The Languedocien dialect of Périgord is characterised by two major subdialects: *Bergeracois* and *Sarladais*, which Sumien (2009: p. 17) does not differentiate but rather combines into a sub-dialect with one or other name and classifies as one of the dialectal varieties of *lengadocian septentrional o guianes*<sup>25</sup>.



Cf. Leveque (2015: p. 40).

Returning to the original question “what is occitan of Périgord?”, it has to be said that the above descriptions show that there is no reason to speak of an Occitan of Périgord in the strict sense of the term, as the territory in question does not constitute a homogeneous linguistic area but is distinguished by the particularity of straddling two dialectal areas of Occitan, Limousin to the north and Languedoc to the south. As has been observed in other Occitan territories, Périgord shows a dialectal fragmentation, continuing at sub-dialectal level, without having dialectal areas hermetically sealed off from one another, but with blurred boundaries giving rise to dialectal areas that follow one another in a fluid manner while retaining a few characteristic features of their own. The Occitan of Périgord is therefore in reality a set of Occitan languages limited by fixed adminis-

<sup>25</sup>Sumien (2009: p. 13): “Peiregòrd se repartís entre lo lemosin peiregordin au nòrd e lo lengadocian brageiragués o sarladés au sud. Lo tèrme lemosin peiregordin es mens ambigü que peiregordin solet.” English translation: “Peiregòrd is distributed between the *Lemosin Peiregordin* in the north and the *Lengadocian brageiragués* or *sarladés* in the south. The term *lemosin peiregordin* is less ambiguous than only *peiregordin*.”

trative borders but linguistically permeable, thus reflecting the dialectal fragmentation of the Occitan language observed and described above.

#### 4. Occitan in the Périgord: The State of Vitality

A closer look at the vitality of Occitan in Périgord reveals a stark picture. The use of Occitan in Périgord has been declining for decades. Two sociolinguistic surveys carried out over the last twenty years bear witness to this trend.

The first was carried out in 1997 by the Institut Média-pluriel in Montpellier at the request of the Regional Council on the practices and representations of Occitan in Aquitaine.

According to this survey, in terms of the number of Occitan speakers and the number of people who speak the language, the Dordogne clearly stands out, as 54% of those surveyed said they understood the language and 47% said they spoke it, which is well above the 35% and 19% respectively for the Aquitaine region as a whole.

When asked how they learned the language, the vast majority (91%) said they learned it from their family.

With regard to this transmission, [Châteaureynaud \(2001: p. 103\)](#) points out that “a large proportion of today’s Occitan speakers constitute a rather elderly population who have benefited from a family transmission of the language” and that “this same generation, on the other hand, has rarely practiced Occitan with its own children”, which is reflected in the fact that 63% of those surveyed answered no to the question “Do your children speak Occitan?”

The survey shows that, by 1997, the family was no longer fulfilling its role as transmitter of the Occitan language and that there were serious threats hanging over Occitan in Aquitaine in general and in the Dordogne in particular, even though the language was even more present and lively there than elsewhere.

A 2020 survey commissioned by the *Office public de la langue occitane* (OPLO) on the practice and representations of the Occitan language in New Aquitaine showed that only 22% of respondents said they understood and 8% spoke Occitan without difficulty or sufficiently to carry on a conversation.

The structuring of the above data according to age reveals a fundamental problem for the vitality of Occitan, namely the lack of speakers under the age of 30. Only 1% of those surveyed in the 15 - 29 age group claim to understand and speak Occitan at least well enough to hold a simple conversation, 2% understand what is said in Occitan perfectly or easily, and 2% say they read Occitan easily or fairly easily. These figures illustrate the significant shortage of young speakers, resulting in a very low level of linguistic succession.

The overall conclusion drawn from a comparison of the two sociolinguistic surveys is clear. The Occitan language in Périgord is in sharp decline in terms of the number of speakers and the rate of transmission between generations and within families.

The Périgord is therefore not an exception in the French Occitan-speaking



area, but part of a general decline affecting the whole of Occitan-speaking France.

The lack of mother-tongue speakers of Occitan<sup>26</sup>, combined with the indications that can be found in the research literature regarding the transmission of dialectal varieties of Occitan<sup>27</sup>, leads us to assume that the generational or family transmission of Occitan is in sharp decline. This is confirmed by Polzin-Haumann (2017: p. 95), who states that “family transmission is diminishing, even ceasing to exist” or has indeed been interrupted, as Dourdet (2020: p. 2) points out: “family transmission was interrupted between the two wars, or just after the war, depending on the case, with a few exceptions”, echoing the observation made a few years earlier by Bistolfi (2004: p. 176), who notes that “transmission no longer takes place.”

This lack of Occitan speakers and the significant decline in the transmission of Occitan within families and between generations has resulted in Occitan being classified as an endangered language by UNESCO, which includes not only Occitan as a whole but also its most important dialectal groups. The declining vitality of Occitan in the Périgord in terms of practice and transmission is confirmed by two elements noted during a sociolinguistic survey carried out by the author of this article during the 102nd edition of the *Félibrée*. This is a major Occitan festival inspired by the *Félibrige*, a current of thought initiated by Frédéric Mistral and poet friends in 1854 in Provence, whose vocation is to contribute to the consideration and safeguarding of the occitan language and culture.

Valéry Bigault, vice-president of the cultural association *Lo Bornat dau Périgord*, sums up the *Félibrige*'s intention perfectly: “It had to do with the language. They were beginning to realize that it was no longer being used as it had been in the past, so they wanted to defend the language through poetry<sup>28</sup>.”

The *Félibrée* opens its doors in a different village every July, over a period of three days, culminating on Sunday. Organised by *Lo Bornat dau Périgord*, it is run by a local committee from the host village. The festival may move from town to town, but its message and values remain unchanged. The *majoraux*, guarantors of the félibréenne philosophy, see to that. One of them, Jean Monestier, wrote in 1984: “La Félibrée, a celebration of the Occitan language and the félibres, a celebration of the land and Périgord tradition”<sup>29</sup>.

Traditionally, the Occitan language plays a key role in the *Félibrée*, as concern for its preservation is the very reason why the *Félibrige* movement was founded, which in turn inspired the organization of the *Félibrée*.

<sup>26</sup>Andreo (2021: p. 76): “On l’a vu, la situation de déclin de la transmission a donné lieu à une situation sociolinguistique particulière dans laquelle les compétences en langue occitane est telle que depuis plusieurs décennies, il n’existe plus de personne de langue maternelle occitane monolingue Sauzet (1988), ce qui complique la catégorisation des locuteurs occitanophones.”

<sup>27</sup>Morin (2017: p. 126) déclare par exemple pour la transmission de la variété occitane de la Drôme que “les transmissions directe et indirecte sont moribondes,” Châteaureynaud (2001: p. 103) constate pour la Dordogne la “perte de la transmission familiale,” Cavaillé (2013: p. 2) dû à un manque de transmission déclare que “la vitalité de l’occitan limousin, est catastrophique.”

<sup>28</sup>Série de l’été: Pourquoi la Félibrée se déroule-t-elle en Périgord? (francetvinfo.fr).

<sup>29</sup>La Félibrée, pour que vive la culture occitane (francesudouest.com).

The central role of Occitan at the *Félibrée* should therefore be expressed by a major presence of the language at several levels during the event. For the *Félibrée* in July 2023, which took place in the commune of Montignac-Lascaux, this presence could only be confirmed in terms of the linguistic landscape of the organizing village or town, as many streets and shops displayed bilingual French-Occitan signs during the *Félibrée* 2023. However, as this presence does not last beyond the days of the festival, Occitan is practically invisible in everyday life, as there are very few signs or posters in Occitan in the commune, and even the street names are unilingual French outside the *Félibrée*.

In contrast to the linguistic landscape, the use and representation of the Occitan language testify to its subordinate role at the *Félibrée*. This impression is the result of a survey carried out during the *Félibrée* using a questionnaire with exhibitors, organizers and visitors to the *Félibrée*, on the use and representation of the Occitan language. This showed that out of around fifty people, 88% said that they did not know how to speak Occitan and therefore did not use it in their daily lives, and 95% said that the Occitan language played no role in their daily lives.

Most of those surveyed also said that they were of Occitan origin but that their parents and grandparents, who were often still Occitan speakers, had only passed on a few scraps of the language to them and that they were therefore unable to use it for communicative purposes or pass it on to their children.

The experiences made during the *Félibrée* lead us to believe that the figures recorded during the sociolinguistic surveys mentioned correspond to reality and that the actual practice of Occitan in Périgord is therefore very limited and plays practically no role in everyday life in Périgord. The main reason for this flagrant lack of use of the Occitan language in Périgord in everyday life is the lack of family transmission, which was also revealed during the survey carried out for the *Félibrée*, thus continuing an observation made by [Châteaureynaud \(2001: p. 103\)](#) some twenty years ago, that in Dordogne the Occitan language was strongly affected by the “loss of family transmission.”

## 5. Cultural Prosperity: Virtual and Real

The preceding sections have made it clear that the use of Occitan plays virtually no role in everyday communication in Périgord and that Périgord is therefore not an exception in the hexagonal Occitan-speaking linguistic area.

This raises the question of whether, despite the marked absence of Occitan from public life in Périgord, there are linguistic areas where Occitan is used.

The research carried out for this article shows that the main spaces in which Occitan in Périgord is used today are the real cultural space and the virtual cultural space.

In this context, the real cultural space includes cultural work on the Occitan language with the aim of spreading the Occitan language and culture in direct and real contact with the population. The virtual cultural space also aims to dis-

seminate the Occitan language among the population but this by relying on modern communication media, such as television, radio and the internet which increases their reach.

The virtual domain in particular can be seen as a breath of fresh air for the Occitan language, making it no exception among minority languages: “It is our understanding that virtual communities are the perfect candidates to function as “breathing spaces” for minority languages [...]”<sup>30</sup>.

The term “real culture” includes private associations working to maintain the Occitan language. In Périgord, this includes associations such as the local branch of the *Institut d’Etudes Occitanes/Institut d’Estudis Occitans (IEO)*; *Lo Bornat dau Perigòrd*, a cultural association which aims to disseminate the Occitan language and culture; two local establishments in Périgord belonging to the *Calandreta* network of private Occitan schools, located in Périgueux and Bergerac, which provide teaching in Occitan; the parents’ association *Òc-Bi Lemosin-Perigòrd*, which promotes French-Occitan bilingualism in public education, and other associations, all of which aim to spread the Occitan language and culture through various actions, events and activities, such as the *Félibrée* au Périgord mentioned above.

These various initiatives bear witness to a certain amount of activity around the Occitan language and culture in a space described as a “real cultural space”, due to its field of activity and its roots in real life.

The virtual cultural space brings together different media offering content in the Occitan language. Some of them focus on the Périgord, others cover a wider linguistic area such as the Limousin and the whole of Languedoc, and others extend their area of influence to the geographical limits of Occitan.

The media in question include *Oc TV*, an online TV channel offering programs in Occitan on society, culture and the Occitan language; *France bleu Périgord*, a radio channel broadcasting programs in Occitan on society and culture, such as *meitat chen meitat porc*; radio channels entirely in Occitan on socio-cultural subjects, such as *radio occitania*; programs in Occitan on *France 3*, such as *viure al país*, a socio-cultural program; websites focusing on the Occitan language and culture, such as *Jornalet.com*, a site publishing articles on regional, national and international news; *sapiencia.eu*, a site publishing scientific articles in Occitan; and *lo congrès* web applications grouped around Occitan vocabulary, lexicon and translation.

This virtual space, offering a wider range of audio-visual products than the real space, can be described as a cultural-virtual space.

Within the two spaces mentioned, the main players working to disseminate the Occitan language and culture are mainly *fluent* or *semi-speakers*, aiming in particular to attract new speakers, the *neo-speakers*.

The types of speakers mentioned are based on the classification of speakers of endangered languages by Grinevald & Bert (1999: pp. 49-52) and that of Lafont

<sup>30</sup>Blommaert (2019: p. 1).

(1972) concerning speakers of Occitan, qualifying *fluent-speakers* as speakers with the most advanced abilities, *semi-speakers* as speakers showing appropriate passive abilities in the language but very varied production abilities and *neo-speakers* as speakers assuming a central role in linguistic revitalization, kinds of language learners at risk in the context of revitalization programs and activities, displaying a level of competence varying between the category of *semi-speakers* and that of fluent speakers. It has to be said, then, that the very low level of actual practice of Occitan in Périgord is matched by a genuine cultural prosperity, both real and virtual, leading to the question of whether the cultural-real space and the cultural-virtual space can save the practice of Occitan in Périgord.

## 6. Can Real and Virtual Cultural Spaces Save Occitan in Périgord?

In the two areas in question, the main players working to disseminate the Occitan language and culture are mainly fluent or semi-speakers, aiming in particular to attract new speakers, the *neo-speakers*, by trying to use the virtual domain to offer new ways of using the language.

This approach corresponds to the spirit conveyed by the following quote, advocating bringing the language forward to new speakers and new ways of using it, “it would, ultimately, be more realistic to focus not on bringing back former patterns of use but on bringing “language forward to new users and uses.”<sup>31</sup>

As the number of native speakers of Occitan continues to decline, it is important to attract new speakers of the language in order to increase the likelihood that it will become a permanent language.

The areas of use of Occitan described, the real and virtual cultural space, are part of an approach based on recruiting new speakers, relying in particular on new media and their free accessibility, allowing users to self-manage the use of these media as they see fit. This flexibility in the use of Occitan media demonstrates the openness of the Occitan language to a new type of speaker. This virtual space, which is particularly popular with new speakers, represents a breath of fresh air for Occitan.

The virtual space is suitable for *neo-speakers*, who often do not have the knowledge of Occitan to use it fluently in everyday life. In particular, the virtual context offers a passive and self-managed use of the Occitan language.

What’s more, the virtual space lends itself perfectly to attracting young users who are used to the virtual world and its communication codes. It therefore seems conducive to training a new generation of speakers.

Certainly, the virtual space allows you to expose yourself mainly passively to the Occitan language and to benefit from the wide choice of Occitan media. These different devices can help improve passive linguistic skills in Occitan, but it is at the level of oral expression that the problem lies.

<sup>31</sup>Romaine (2006: p. 464).

Apart from discussion forums on the internet, for example *Forum langue d'oc*—*Forum Babel* ([projetbabel.org](http://projetbabel.org)), *Forum Occitan*, *Lenga d'òc* ([reddit.com](http://reddit.com)), *Occitania!! Forum—Portal* ([forumactif.com](http://forumactif.com)), and there in writing, the virtual space does not offer spaces for practicing oral expression in Occitan. However, a language that is not or very little spoken orally is in serious danger.

Consequently, it is highly unlikely that new speakers will reach a sufficiently high oral level through virtual space to be able to transmit the Occitan language to the next generation.

Thus, there is reason to assume that learning Occitan, by relying on the virtual space, makes it possible to increase the number of Occitan speakers in the short and medium term but not necessarily in the long term.

Despite significant real and virtual cultural activity around the Occitan language in Périgord, the descriptions above show that the two major elements threatening the vitality of the Occitan language persist. This is on the one hand the lack of active oral practice of the Occitan language in everyday life as well as the almost total break in the family or generational transmission of the Occitan language.

Appearing together, these two factors lead to a vicious circle. Without regular practice of Occitan, there are not enough speakers who can ensure the generational transmission of the language and a breakdown in generational transmission leads to the decline of regular oral practice of Occitan. These two factors, which condition each other, therefore strongly contribute to a gradual decline in the rate of Occitan speakers and considerably jeopardize the maintenance of the practice of Occitan, not only in Périgord but throughout the entire occitan-speaking area.

## 7. Measures to Increase the Number of Occitan Speakers

As the previous reflections have shown, the virtual cultural space does not seem capable of reversing in the long term the decline in the number of Occitan speakers in Périgord.

Consequently, the question arises what measures or actions could be able to slow down the decline in the practice of the Occitan language in Périgord and in the best cases contribute to increasing its number of speakers?

With a decreasing rate of speakers, a lack of visibility in the public space and the absence of practice spaces, it is clear that the measures currently put in place to promote the practice of the Occitan language are not sufficient to ensure the sustainability of Occitan in Périgord.

There are, however, measures to be taken in the approach to rebuilding social relations between groups within a society, cf. [Lafont \(1997\)](#) or [Costa & Petit Cahill \(2021\)](#), this means by soliciting cooperation between different parts of society, in particular pro-Occitan associations, the French state and the population.

The measures proposed subsequently, likely to increase the visibility as well as the practice of Occitan in Périgord, do not claim to be exhaustive, but constitute



simple stimulations for reflection.

Since the collapse of intergenerational transmission accelerated significantly during the twentieth century “the responsibility for the transmission of language has been delegated to teaching for more than fifty years”<sup>32</sup> and faults in linguistic models in the families it is up to teachers to assume “the responsibility of training new speakers.”<sup>33</sup>

The absence of universities offering Occitan teaching in the Périgord territory means that “the role of school transmission is central”<sup>34</sup>.

There are two types of teaching of Occitan in a school setting in Périgord: that offered by national education and that provided by the *Calandreta* association<sup>35</sup>.

According to the local radio channel France bleu Périgord “the department of Dordogne serves as a leading figure in the teaching of the Occitan language”<sup>36</sup>, declaring that “recently, the teaching of Occitan is experiencing a revival in Dordogne, with 1330 students in total learning this regional language, including 561 in secondary education.”<sup>37</sup>

To these figures, dating from 2023, are added around 120 students benefiting from immersive teaching in one of the two *Calandreta* in Périgord, located in Périgueux respectively in Bergerac.

Official statistics reveal<sup>38</sup> that public primary and secondary education institutions in Périgord currently accommodate around 52,000 students, including approximately 27,500 in primary education, 14,500 in middle schools and 10,000 in general and vocational high schools. Based on these figures, the rate of students learning Occitan in primary education is 2.4% and 2.3% in secondary education.

Certainly, benefiting from education in Occitan in a private or public estab-

<sup>32</sup>Châteaureynaud & Olçomendi (2022: p. 23) original citation: “la responsabilité de la transmission de la langue a été déléguée à l’enseignement depuis plus de cinquante ans.”

<sup>33</sup>Châteaureynaud & Olçomendi (2022: p. 23) original citation: “la responsabilité de former de nouveaux locuteurs.”

<sup>34</sup>Châteaureynaud & Olçomendi (2022: p. 23) original citation: “le rôle de la transmission scolaire est central.”

<sup>35</sup>Châteaureynaud (2007: p. 296): “La *Calandreta* est une association proposant un service d’éducation, avec un enseignement immersif en occitan, gratuit, et laïque. Aujourd’hui le réseau comprend 69 établissements, dont la plupart sont des établissements du primaire et quelques-unes des collèges, rassemblant en tout 3905 écoliers.

Des préceptes fondamentaux des *Calandretas* sont de sortir les élèves du monolinguisme, de les intéresser au plurilinguisme et de leur donner accès à la langue et à la culture occitanes.» English translation “La Calandreta is an association offering an education service, with immersive teaching in Occitan, free, and secular. Today the network includes 69 establishments, most of which are primary schools and some middle schools, bringing together a total of 3905 schoolchildren. Fundamental precepts of the Calandretas are to get students out of monolingualism, to interest them in multilingualism and to give them access to the Occitan language and culture.”

<sup>36</sup>La situation de l’enseignement de l’occitan en Dordogne vue par Martial Peyrouny—France Bleu original citation: “le département de la Dordogne fait office de figure de proue concernant l’enseignement de la langue occitane.”

<sup>37</sup>L’occitan, une langue qui séduit les élèves périgourdins—France Bleu original citation: “récemment, l’enseignement de l’occitan connaît un renouveau en Dordogne, avec 1330 élèves au total apprenant cette langue régionale, dont 561 dans l’enseignement secondaire.”

<sup>38</sup>Dordogne: tout ce qu’il faut savoir sur la rentrée scolaire (sudouest.fr);

<https://www.sudouest.fr/politique/education/dordogne-tout-ce-qu-il-faut-savoir-sur-la-rentree-scolaire-5671153.php>

lishment allows, depending on the duration of the education, to acquire knowledge of the Occitan language and in particular students completing their training in the bilingual section should have reached a sufficient level of Occitan to use it in daily life, “students who complete their Occitan course at high school in Modern Language 2 or Modern Language 3 may be able to express themselves correctly in Occitan.”<sup>39</sup>

However, for learners of Occitan to become true *neo-speakers* of Occitan, capable of transmitting the Occitan language to future generations, school education alone is not enough, daily practice of the Occitan language is essential, which would require socialization in Occitan<sup>40</sup>, a social environment favoring and promoting the use of Occitan.

There are therefore several challenges to overcome, strongly linked to each other, so that the number of Occitan speakers in Périgord can increase.

The first concerns school. The number of students learning Occitan in public and private schools must be increased and a greater number of hours of Occitan learning should be offered. The change in the status of Occitan from LV2 respectively LV3 to LV1 would bring it a gain in hourly volume as well as more prestige, putting it at the same level as the language most chosen by students in France, namely English<sup>41</sup>.

The fact that Occitan is in many cases an optional subject at school in Périgord brings it into competition with other optional subjects, at the risk of the Occitan language being drowned out. It would be recommended to free Occitan from its status as an optional subject and grant it a more important status, more restrictive for students, so that Occitan affects a greater number of students during their school career.

Attracting more students to learn Occitan depends, among other things, on its usefulness for daily life and the professional opportunities that this language can offer. This is where the second challenge comes into play, which is to make the link between school practice and social practice of Occitan.

In this context, an important step is to bring more visibility to Occitan in Périgord in terms of the linguistic landscape, which remains strongly dominated by the French language.

To compensate for the lack of visibility of the Occitan language in the public space of Périgord, the bilingual French-Occitan signs installed at the entrance to certain towns or communities as well as street signs here and there in Occitan are not sufficient.

It would be desirable to increase the number of these bilingual signs by adding them to tourist sites, public buildings and businesses. Increasing the visibility of

<sup>39</sup>Châteaureynaud (2007: p. 292) citation originale: “des élèves qui achèvent leur cursus d’occitan au lycée en Langue vivante 2 ou Langue vivante 3 peuvent être en mesure de s’exprimer correctement en occitan.”

<sup>40</sup>Châteaureynaud (2007: p. 292).

<sup>41</sup>Choisir ses langues vivantes|Mallette des parents (education.gouv.fr) en LV1 le choix des élèves porte à hauteur de 95.4% sur l’anglais. English translation: as a first foreign language, 95.4% of students choose English.

the Occitan language in the public space of Périgord would make it possible to raise awareness among the local population as well as French and foreign tourists of the existence and usefulness of this language in daily life, thus contributing to dismantling the image of a troubadour's language can be adapted to the demands of the modern world.

An additional step could be to increase the opportunities to practice Occitan in daily life in Périgord. This could result in the creation of linguistic spaces allowing or imposing the practice of Occitan, a very important step in highlighting the social usefulness of Occitan, for example for everyday communication, in situations of varied communication. These spaces for practicing Occitan can be created both on a real and virtual level.

In real life these spaces could, for example, find application among Occitan-speaking merchants or restaurateurs, encouraging customers with signs that in their establishment it is possible to communicate in Occitan or during administrative procedures, offering the possibility to express yourself in Occitan language.

At the virtual level, concrete measures to promote the oral practice of the Occitan language could result in the creation of virtual spaces, through communication platforms such as zoom or BBB for example, where one can practice Occitan with other speakers around different subjects relating to different areas.

These online discussion groups could be supervised by Occitan associations such as the IEO or by the Occitan studies departments of the Jean Jaurès University of Toulouse or the Paul Valéry University of Montpellier and made available to anyone interested.

To bring weight to such spaces for practicing in real and virtual spaces the Occitan language, the cooperation of the three major players in Occitan is essential. Despite the commitment and will provided by Occitan cultural associations and private initiatives, the financial resources and the political-linguistic impact are quite different through the French State.

It therefore seems essential to take advantage of the synergies generated by the three principal actors of Occitan to slow down the decline in the rate of Occitan speakers in Périgord and to nourish the hope of effectively promoting the socialization of the Occitan language in everyday life in Périgord.

## 8. Conclusion

The article allowed us to take stock of some questions concerning Occitan in Périgord and encourages reflection regarding its sustainability.

It has been shown that Occitan in Périgord, despite its particular geographical position placing it in two dialect zones, is not exempt from the decline in practice affecting the Occitan language throughout the Occitan linguistic zone in France.

Despite a low rate of speakers, the article highlighted that there is a certain vitality around the Occitan language in Périgord in the real and virtual cultural space making it possible to acquire new speakers of Occitan and to increase its

visibility.

However, as these spaces lead more to a passive formation of the language, favoring written comprehension and oral comprehension, than to a real oral or written practice, consequently not creating a new generation of native speakers capable of transmitting the Occitan language to the next generation, it is unlikely that cultural space and virtual space will be able to reverse the decline in the number of Occitan speakers in Périgord in the long term.

Sustaining the active use of the Occitan language, however, requires the creation of new generations of speakers for whom the Occitan language constitutes at least a second mother tongue, which they are proud to pass on to future generations.

This requires measures that Occitan cultural associations and private initiatives cannot carry out alone, but which require the involvement of representatives of the French State. These measures should focus on increasing the number of students learning Occitan in school, on the revaluation of Occitan in public education, and on greater visibility of the Occitan language in public spaces in Périgord as well as the creation of spaces for practicing Occitan in the public and virtual space allowing the practice of Occitan outside the school setting.

Without facilitating the use of Occitan in public spaces in Périgord and without encouraging the population to use Occitan in their daily lives, it will be difficult to increase the number of Occitan speakers in Périgord.

As long as Occitan remains invisible, even unknown to a large part of the population, its decline will be difficult to slow down and almost impossible to reverse in the Périgord territory as well as throughout the Occitan-speaking territory.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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