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From Little Fatherlands to Imagined Protonation: The Discourse on Francoprovençal in the *Journal de Genève* and the *Gazette de Lausanne* (1826–1998)

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Abstract

Francoprovençal is a Romance language originating in the sixth century and described by linguists in the nineteenth century. There are still many young native speakers in Italy (Aosta Valley), unlike France and Switzerland, where speakers can only be found in the traditionally Catholic cantons of Fribourg and Valais. However, the Protestant cantons of Geneva and Vaud also initiated a discussion about the vanishing language. The press archives illustrate the evolution of language representations, ranging from acceptance of the extinction of this *patois* to the insistence on preservation efforts and, more recently, hope for revitalization. The present analysis is based on texts from the *Journal de Genève* and the *Gazette de Lausanne* containing the keywords “patois” and/or “francoprovençal,” from 1826 to 1998. The corpora reflect identity construction based on language at a regional, national or transnational scale. In the nineteenth century, the imagined language community applied to little fatherlands (cantons), to French-speaking Switzerland (Romandy) or to a cross-border space around Geneva (along with Savoy). In the twentieth century, the appearance of the word “francoprovençal” led some people to broaden their interest to the entire FP area, with some manifestations of a “protonational” construction encompassing Swiss, French and Italian regions.

Keywords: francoprovençal, Switzerland, identity, Geneva, Vaud, Savoy, Aosta Valley, nation, canton

1. Introduction

Francoprovençal (FP) is a distinct Romance language originating around the sixth century from the Romanization of Gaul in Lyon but also, more generally, in the areas of influence of Roman transit axes along the western Alpine Arc—Great and Little St Bernard Pass, Montcenis [1]. FP was historically spoken in eastern central France (especially the north of the Rhône-Alpes region), in present-day French-speaking Switzerland (except the canton of Jura), and in north-east Italy (Aosta Valley and some valleys of Piedmont) (see **Figure 1**). It has often been neglected by Romanists because it was only identified in 1874 [2, 3], even though it

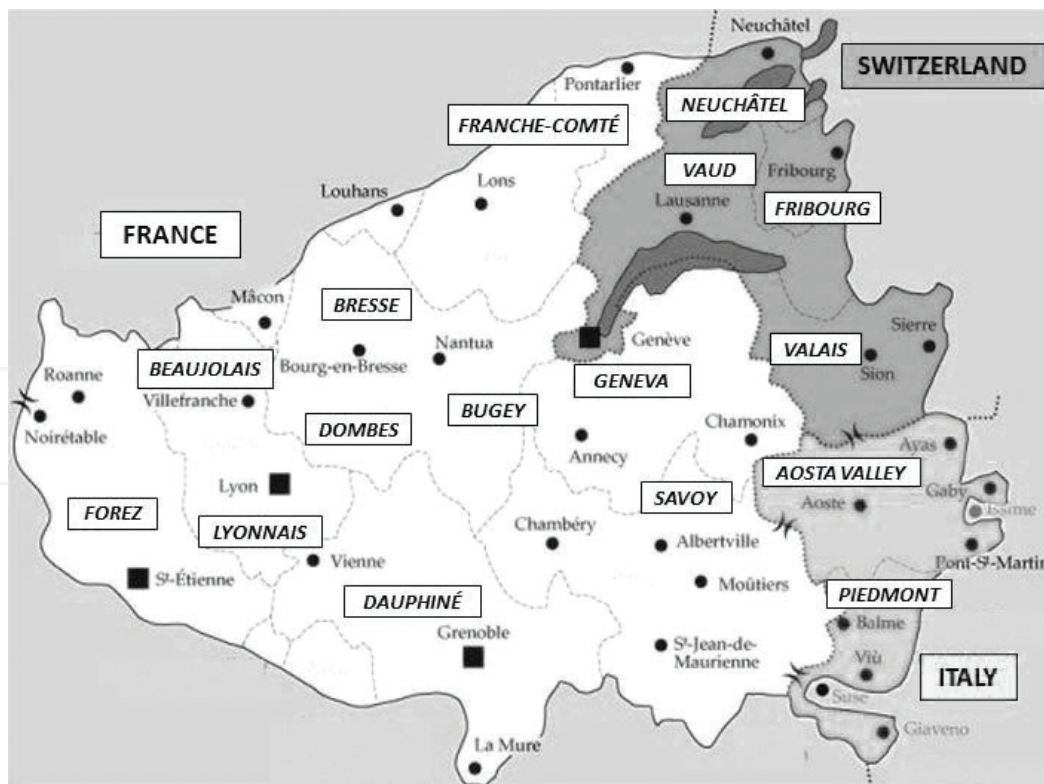


Figure 1.
The Francoprovençal area. Main towns and regions (according to a map from the Centre d'études francoprovençales; Saint-Nicolas, Italy).

had been used for literary purposes as early as the thirteenth century. This endangered language has hardly ever been an administrative language, but it is still used to some extent by a few thousand elderly people and a handful of new speakers in France (Savoie, Bresse, Lyonnais) [4, 5]. It is more prevalent in Italy, where inter-generational transmission still occurs on a relatively large scale. In French-speaking Switzerland, varieties of FP are still spoken in some communities in the Catholic cantons of Fribourg [6] and Valais—where the village of Evolène still has young native speakers [7, 8]. However, the vernacular languages disappeared from the nineteenth century in the Protestant cantons of Neuchâtel, Geneva and Vaud—except in a few communities of the Jorat region [9].

The analysis of the discourse on Francoprovençal, a language spoken in three countries with very different social, political and linguistic traditions, makes it possible to measure, in a comparative way, the impact of the various strategies of (not) promoting language diversity. We will focus here on Switzerland, a country generally celebrated for its management of plurilingualism, but which, in the case of FP, does not seem to live up to its reputation. In particular, we will see how the autonomy of the cantons—a driving force of political and social life in Switzerland—has produced various regional patriotic discourses, thus preventing the emergence of a more unitary discourse on this language, whose transcantonal and transnational character is nevertheless beyond doubt. Through online archives (www.letempsarchives.ch), we will analyze the perceptions of FP by observing how newspaper texts illustrate diverse types of regional or (proto)national identity construction, whether it's Vaud, Geneva, (French-speaking) Swiss identity or a transnational one—encompassing a partial identification with Savoy and/or the Aosta Valley.

In Switzerland as elsewhere, the technical glottonym, “francoprovençal,” is little used by speakers [7, 9, 10], who prefer the term “patois” (even if this term is often negatively connoted among nonspeakers). Switzerland, officially quadrilingual (German, French, Italian, Romansh), has not preserved FP any better than France,

which has partly “exported” its unilingual ideology there, as well as the perspective that French is an intrinsically superior language. Even while the cantons banned the ancestral language from schools, intellectuals sometimes simultaneously promoted it along with their “little fatherland” (especially the canton, but also French-speaking Romandy), and academics or cultural associations undertook to collect data and to maintain or (more rarely) revitalize the practice of the language. In the 2000s, translations of comic books aroused the interest of the general public, and FP is timidly gaining visibility in the school system in the form of optional courses.

The spread of the word “francoprovençal” at the end of the nineteenth century, although far from replacing “patois”, did have an impact on the construction of imagined communities [11], whether large or small, and on the emergence of a possible “protonational” discourse [12] that might replace local or national affiliations by a cross-border sense of belonging. It is these mechanisms that we wish to describe more precisely by analyzing the discourse on FP in the *Journal de Genève* and the *Gazette de Lausanne*. With its multilingual status and its sovereign cantons, which to some extent are like small independent countries, Switzerland, being an atypical nation, appears as a favorable terrain for the study of the evolution of representations of an atypical language—Francoprovençal.

2. Constitution of the corpora

The *Journal de Genève* was founded in 1826 as a liberal weekly, and the *Gazette de Lausanne*, in the same vein, in 1798 (under the name *Peuple vaudois*). They merged in 1991 and again later with the *Nouveau quotidien* in 1998 to give birth to the current reference daily in French-speaking Switzerland—*Le Temps*.

For the *Journal de Genève*, 138 texts (see **Figure 2**) were obtained by using the keywords “patois” and “francoprovençal”¹. Even if we focus largely on the latter designation, it seemed important to analyze, at least for one of the newspapers, the representations associated with the term “patois”. Indeed, before the widespread usage of the name “francoprovençal,” “patois” was in fact the only term which made observing FP reality possible, and it is therefore necessary to study the occurrences of this original designation in order to better understand the evolution initiated by the new term. The first part of the corpus (GE-1) comprises 96 texts having at least one occurrence of the keyword “patois”, published between 1826 (first occurrence) and 1908 (last year before the first occurrence of “francoprovençal” in 1909). Most of the texts, unsigned, are short notices about political or social life, more often culture and literature (conferences, reviews, etc.). The second part (GE-2) comprises 42 texts with at least one occurrence of the keyword “francoprovençal” (and its feminine or plural forms), between 1909 and 1998 (first and last occurrences). Thirty-one of these texts also contain a reference to “patois”, but the corpus does not include the texts (too numerous to be taken into account here) that do reference “patois,” but *not* “francoprovençal.” Most of these texts, generally longer than in the GE-1 corpus, are signed, often by academics, which highlights the fact that the specialized term is not yet adopted by the general public [13].

For the *Gazette de Lausanne*, the corpus (VD, for Vaud) contains 37 texts (see **Figure 3**) with at least one occurrence of the keyword “francoprovençal” (and its declined forms) from 1875 to 1988 (first and last occurrences). Again, these texts may contain references to “patois,” but texts with only the word “patois” are not

¹ Since the 1960s, academics have used “francoprovençal” without a hyphen (to underscore the autonomous character of the language), but outside university circles, the term is still often hyphenated. This is almost always the case in the press corpus studied.

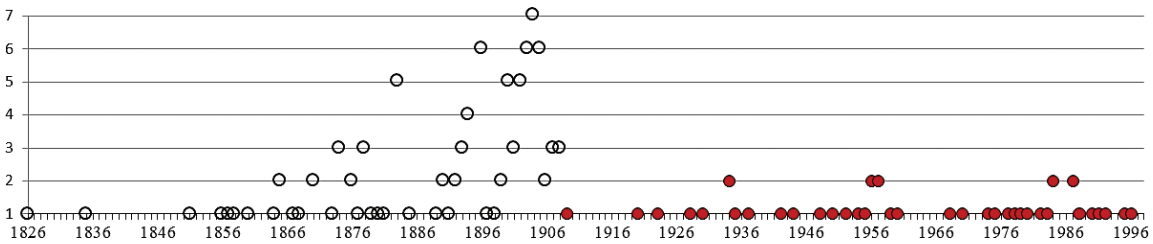


Figure 2.
Journal de Genève = Number of texts with at least 1 occurrence of “patois” (○) [GE-1, 1826–1908] and “francoprovençal” (●) [GE-2, 1908–1998].

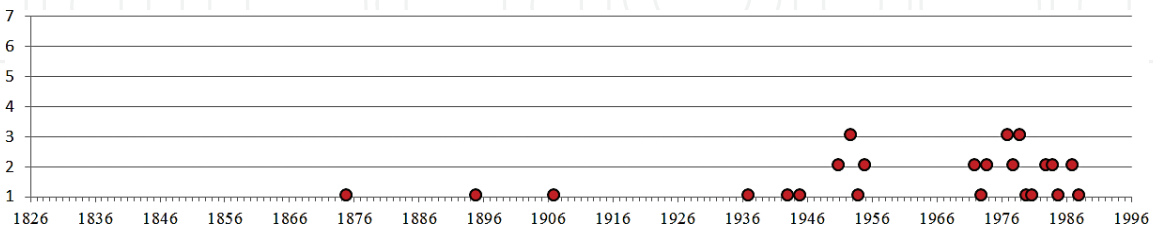


Figure 3.
Gazette de Lausanne = Number of texts with at least 1 occurrence of “francoprovençal” (●) [VD, 1875–1998].

taken into account. When these texts do have signed authors, they are sometimes *Gazette* journalists but more often specialists (writers, linguists or other academics). As for the GE-1 corpus, the texts may be short dispatches or communiqués. However, the more academic quality of the word “francoprovençal” is reflected in the fact that the contributions of the GE-2 corpus are more often background articles relating to literature and culture pages [14].

For both newspapers, we will focus particularly on certain key texts that illustrate the range of linguistic representations present². It should be noted that there are no editorial articles specifically about FP in either corpus—the subject at hand probably never having been perceived as a worthy enough topic.

3. *Patois* in the GE-1 corpus (1826–1909)

3.1 The various geographical origins of the multiple *patois*

The word “patois” has no precise meaning unless accompanied by an adjective. The long period during which the term “francoprovençal” is absent from the *Journal de Genève* allows us to observe to which geographic and/or linguistic realities the term “patois” applies. It certainly regularly designates the FP dialects of Romandy (officially French-speaking Swiss territories), but various occurrences also apply to England, Germany, Denmark, Wallonia, Greece, etc. “Patois” sometimes simply refers to a rural language, but it awakens reflections on the disparity between linguistic and national borders or on the compatibility between dialectal diversity and cultural unity, as well as on the particular way Switzerland as a “nation of will” makes multilingualism go hand in hand with a uninational framework.

The word “patois” occurs much more frequently in regard to France: Limousin, Franche-Comté, Berri, but especially Provence—the region outside the FP area that is the most represented in the corpus. Before the creation of the FP concept in

² The quotes are in English and all translations are mine—to consult the original in French, see [12] (*Journal de Genève*) and [13] (*Gazette de Lausanne*).

1874, France remained very binary, divided between the languages of *oil* and *oc*. The strong visibility of Provence and Provençal in the second half of the nineteenth century, linked to the popularity of Frédéric Mistral's *Félibrige* movement promoting the revival of Occitan, may have slowed down the awareness of a threefold division of the Gallo-Romance linguistic area [6]. Still, the activities of the *Félibrige*, closely followed by the *Journal de Genève*, indirectly encouraged engaging in sociolinguistic reflections on Switzerland. The newspaper oscillates between support for the rescue of the Provençal language and denunciation of its past-oriented character. Thus, in an article on Mistral, one author regrets that the "language of the troubadours" is dead since the school system "chases it away from the young heads"; he is, however, pleased that it left "these charming local *patois* which would be called languages if the conquerors from the North had allowed it", and he notes a certain kinship of spirit between Provence and Rhodanian Switzerland, geographically and ideologically turned toward the south of France (December 6, 1883). Another author, far less benevolent, ridicules the desire to raise the status of Provençal and is pleased that the Romands, faced with the erosion of their ancestral language, reject southern linguistic activism (September 5, 1896).

3.2 The *patois* of Romandy: between patriotic logic and conservatory work

With regard to Switzerland, the reflections on "*patois*", which most often concern Romandy (52 articles while only 4 about German-speaking Switzerland), illustrate Romand's quest for symbolic equality between German- and French-speaking Swiss. The celebration of local languages serves to show the attachment to a mythified Switzerland. Thus, the publication of the *Glossaire des patois de la Suisse romande* is presented as the counterpart of the already existing *Schweizerisches Idiotikon* (September 6, 1873, April 28, 1900) and also as constituting a "treasure of our national history" (February 23, 1903). The collection of songs in *patois romand* is seen as an "eminently patriotic work" (December 22, 1907) that must be pursued with as much enthusiasm as the German Swiss do. Patriotism here is both Swiss and Romand, and the corpus displays the faith in a Swiss nation founded on respect for "national languages"—of which *patois romand* is an implicit part. Since plurilingualism is a central element of identity construction in Switzerland (unlike the officially unilingual nations that surround it), the national dynamic is based both on a pluricultural and plurilingual "Swiss idea" and on allegiance to the respective ancestral languages. Pride for the *patois* of French-speaking Switzerland is part of the national narrative, which requires each linguistic community to participate in "Swissness" by adding its own personality to the mix. The *Ranz des vaches* dear to Rousseau, although stemming from Gruyères (Fribourg), is therefore considered as applying to the whole of Romandy—as "our true national song" (February 17, 1892) and as a "unique national poem" (June 21, 1904)—without compromising the Swiss national idea. While clearly no one is thinking of making *patois romand* official as Switzerland's fifth language, it is symbolically becoming a co-national language. The imagined community [11] of Romandy is integrated into the pan-Swiss nation-building process, according to a paradigm that values both the languages of Switzerland and the native language of each region. This attachment to both Romand (French- or *patois*-speaking) and Swiss (multilingual) communities does not exclude a cross-border discourse on the *patois*.

3.3 Savoy and Geneva: one and the same we-feeling

The French region most mentioned with regard to "*patois*" is Savoy (13 articles), because of the kinship between Savoyard and Genevan dialects. In various texts

evoking dictionaries or monographs, despite the conflicting political past between Geneva and Savoy, the Geneva “we-feeling” is confused with the Savoyard one. Although describing the rout of the Savoyard Catholics against the Genevan Calvinists, the *Cé qué l’ainô*, the “Escalade Song” that became the Geneva anthem, is presented as a common work written in “Savoyard *patois*” (August 17, 1903). The latter is seen as “the *patois* of our fathers” which feeds an “Allobrogian melancholy” and a belonging to “both a lacustrian race and an Alpine race” (August 6, 1891). The Genevans, who abandoned the local language earlier than the Savoyards, are invited to draw inspiration from the conservation work undertaken in Savoy (April 27, 1903). The *Conspiration de Compesières* (1695), a poem which “illustrates the comic verve of the ancient Genevans” (February 6, 1870), is also presented as a text in “Savoyard *patois*”, while another author regrets that the younger generation avoids “popular phrases in fear of betraying its nationality” (September 16, 1865)—in this context of cross-border patriotism, it is not known whether the nationality in question is the Genevan or the Savoyard one.

3.4 Discrimination, modernization and disappearance

Sometimes, the reference to “patois” in the *Journal de Genève* only concerns Geneva (historical documents, literary or linguistic questions), without any link to Savoy. However, since Geneva’s dialect was already moribund from the nineteenth century onwards, the interest of the newspaper is sometimes directed toward cantons where the dialect has been better maintained: Valais (4 texts), but especially Vaud (12) and Fribourg (10), whose publications (partly) in *patois* are regularly mentioned. In addition to the interest in preserving *patois*, there are a few remarks on the linguistic policy that today would be described as “glottophagic” [15] or “glottophobic” [16], which incited the canton of Fribourg to ban *patois* at school [17]. One article reports the “very lively” discussion on “measures to introduce the use of French into families” on the grounds that the use of *patois* causes the “inferiority of the Fribourg schools”—whereas some teachers refuse that *patois* be despised (July 17, 1885).

Two articles tackle the question of the disappearance of the many local *patois*—often perceived as inevitable because of the internalized stigmatization. Although they are “the soul of the people”, one contributor says the *patois* are doomed to “decomposition”, a phenomenon accelerated by the “infiltration of the French language” and by the “sarcasms” of the generations for which it is a thing of the past; a unification of the dialects as in the Provençal/Occitan model is also excluded (August 8, 1900). Another author concludes that “our mountain people” are now interested in Manchuria and that they have “a world-oriented soul” (April 22, 1905). In addition, at the turn of the twentieth century, the representations shown in the *Journal de Genève* do not seem to consider the existence of a language corresponding to the present-day perception of FP.

4. Francoprovençal in the GE-2 corpus (1909–1995)

4.1 The Aosta Valley: the new heart of the language region

Let us now turn to the 42 articles which, from 1909, include a reference to “francoprovençal,” a term proposed by the Italian linguist Graziadio Isaia Ascoli in 1874 [2]. This new concept, which has taken time to spread, changed representations by extending the reflection to regions that were often not associated with Romand *patois*. The Aosta Valley, little represented in the GE-1 corpus (1 article), is

much more present in the GE-2 corpus (12 texts). The first article (August 12, 1909) describes the threat of the Italian government banning the French language, which had been protected since the annexation of the region to Italy in 1860. The author reminds the readers that the Valdostans, although good Italian patriots, had French as their written language and FP as their oral language. He adds that some of them envy Switzerland, where “the most disparate languages meet” while the “tiny nationalities that they represent” are respected. The people of Romandy are invited to encourage the Valdostans to “defend their native language,” to keep alive the transnational “community of origin” that exists beyond the vagaries of history and to remember the “common racial affiliation” that is attested by the FP idiom. However, the Aosta Valley also appears to be a linguistic conservatory, a place where a supposedly pure FP is spoken and where the Swiss can “harvest the archaisms which once sprinkled the conversations of their grandfathers.”

In the 1960s and 1970s, with the effervescence of minority groups in Europe, the emergence of a “Valdostan question” within the French-speaking world went hand in hand with a stronger politicization of the “FP question.” One article (October 17, 1968) thus mentions the long coexistence of French, the administrative language in the Aosta Valley, with FP, the oral language that was also a language of literature. The Abbot Cerlogne is described as a “Valdostan *félibre*”—this reference to the Occitan/Provençal area obviously aims to bring dignity and prestige to the FP language. Even after decades of Italianization, if the French language is presented as endangered in the valley, the Valdostans are thought unlikely to lose “their very own language”—which might, in turn, reinforce the position of French (February 12, 1977).

Furthermore, the valley contributed to the genesis of the glottonym “arpitan”—some present-day FP defenders hope this term will gradually replace the hybrid word “francoprovençal.” An article from 1975 quotes a passage written by a Valdostan in “harpetan” (the “h” stems from an alleged Bascoïd etymology, see [18]), which is actually the translation of a work by Mao Zedong, and concludes: “At first, one is surprised. But on reflection, this may not be the strangest offshoot of an old marriage, that of nationalism and internationalism!” (December 30, 1975). Here we observe the emergence of a “protonationalism” [12] which, depending on the period, has taken hold in some parts of the FP area, or indeed in all of it, for example, when protonationalism resurfaced in the 2000s in the form of the dream of a cultural entity (if not a political one) named “Arpitanie” and coinciding with the borders of the FP domain (see [18]).

4.2 From mythified Burgundy to reunified Savoy

The protonational logic was already obvious in 1937 with regard to Savoy, in one of the 11 texts where the reference to FP is linked to this region (September 2, 1937). The article goes beyond historical-linguistic considerations and has a more political content. The author, taking some liberties with history and geography, evokes a “second kingdom of Burgundy” (eleventh century) overlapping “exactly the area of distribution of the Francoprovençal dialect.” Using the more prestigious term “dialect,” he stresses that “our *patois* comprise only one branch of this great dialect spoken by 2 or 3 million inhabitants.” The transnational dimension finally allows him to build a new (mythical) Savoyard national unity:

It is the great Savoy, the Burgundy of the year one thousand, which in reality claims us as its children and as the brothers of the Bressans, the Dauphinois and the Lyonnais, united like us within France, no less than the Genevans, Vaudois, Fribourgeois and Valaisans, as well as the Valdostans separated from us by the vicissitudes of politics and history (September 2, 1937).

After the reference to the glottonym (“francoprovençal”), the ethnonym (“Franco-Provençaux”) that even today is rarely used consolidates the idea of a historical entity that is a transitional place within the Romance continuum, but with a distinct character: “[Our dialect] places us as a link between Provençal and *langue d’oil*, we the Franco-Provençaux come from the kingdom of Rodolphe [...], the cradle of our region”. This mythification of the past aims to build a common identity in the FP domain, which, after first being transnational, then becomes “proto-national”—by creating the possibility of a national(istic) discourse. It is also based on the narratives surrounding historical figures such as “our great Saint Francis de Sales” or the “chevalier Bayard” (the “knight without fear and beyond reproach”), whose Savoyard dialect was supposedly understood throughout the FP area. Finally, the possible linguistic unification or standardization is evoked through the recurrent reference to Mistral’s *Félibrige*, whose method could be used to “reconstitute a true literary language.”

4.3 The francoprovençalization of linguistic awareness in Geneva

Geneva is mentioned 11 times in the GE-2 corpus, but one notes that in 1987, when mentioning the international FP festival held in Thonon (Savoy), the *Journal de Genève* no longer alludes to the kinship between Genevan and Savoyard speakers, as was often the case in the GE-1 corpus. Savoy seems to have somehow faded from consciousness, now supplanted by the awareness of a larger FP entity—which itself no longer corresponds to the mythified “great Savoy” of 1937. The tone becomes more informative and less aimed at identity construction: “the Franco-Provençal *patois*, also the language of the transalpine roads, was spoken until recently by the Savoyards, the Bressans, some Dauphinois and Lyonnais, the inhabitants of Piedmont and in a part of Switzerland” (September 16, 1987).

These changes in linguistic awareness can also be noticed in the discourse of Geneva academics—relayed by the press—who stress the links between Geneva and the whole FP area. As early as the 1920s, one clear sign of the evolution of language representations in Geneva was a key article on a thesis devoted to FP dialects among Geneva Catholic communities (September 24, 1928). The author, Albert Sechehay, welcomes the fact that dialectological studies are no longer “a matter of parochialism” and embrace “vast spaces” rather than encouraging a literature in *patois* that is more of a “pastime.” However, the author displays his sense of belonging to both a remote FP entity as well as a more tightly knit Geneva collectivity, by being pleased that Geneva’s language is now integrated into a larger language area, giving it “a dignity that had been lost because we so readily allowed it”. Also a Genevan patriot, he deplores the fact that Geneva, “so proud of its past,” had forgotten “its particular language”. The *Journal de Genève* does, however, host some opposing points of view, such as that of a public education official in the canton, who rejects any validation of FP and welcomes its disappearance for the sake of Geneva’s belonging to the prestigious French-speaking literary community (July 4, 1934).

4.4 Subsequent interest for a possible revitalization of FP in Romandy

In the GE-2 corpus, cantons other than Geneva are also often mentioned (Fribourg, 10 texts; Valais, 6; Vaud, 6), and they make it possible to tackle the question of a possible revitalization of FP. In the 1970s, the *Journal de Genève* notes that Vaud is a canton where few speakers relearn the “old Latin language” (March 18, 1978)—since there are hardly any native speakers left. And on a performative mode—aimed at creating the very reality that one calls for by using certain terms—one article evokes the “growing interest” for the language, the “rebirth”

of “the authentic son of Latin, but the neglected brother of French”, stressing that school authorities already encourage introductory classes to FP dialects, although not on a large scale (March 27, 1979).

A few longer articles discuss the survival of FP from a sociolinguistic perspective, two of which are particularly in-depth. The first (April 2, 1956), written by the linguist Léopold Gautier, describes the long-lasting French-*patois* colingualism, the desire for social ascension linked to the adoption of French, the way *patois* speakers’ associations reject the idea that saving FP is a lost cause, but also the survival of remnants of FP after its disappearance—in the form of regional French. The second (September 14, 1991) calls for a revitalization of Romandy’s original language while criticizing Swiss language policy. It states that Romans “have forgotten the dialect spoken by [their] ancestors” and that it is unfortunate that it takes a French historian (Occitan specialist René Merle) to “invite [them] to reconsider [their] linguistic past” and to remind them that they “did not speak this ‘French’ of which they are so proud,” but the “Franco-Provençal” language, “contemptuously called ‘patois,’” although used as a “literary language”—for example, in the canton of Fribourg. Merle mentions the “regrettable self-censorship” that prevented many from going beyond “collector’s nostalgia” and argues that Switzerland, “as an independent state, had resources that other regions [...] did not have to develop the writing of this idiom.” The *Journal de Genève* also then challenges the myth of a Switzerland that protects small languages (Romansh being its icon) and concludes: “In its frantic desire to stick to an external model, by denying its language of origin, has Romandy not lost contact with its own identity?”

Let’s now turn to the *Gazette de Lausanne*, to observe to which extent Vaud’s leading daily newspaper displays representations of a Francoprovençal language that differ from the ones found in its Genevan counterpart.

5. Francoprovençal in the VD corpus (1875–1998)

5.1 From the discreet appearance of FP to the persistent attraction of Provençal

Unlike the *Journal de Genève*, the *Gazette de Lausanne* almost immediately acknowledged the existence of the new term, “francoprovençal.” The first trace of this nomenclature appears in an article about a conference on Romance languages in Montpellier (October 4, 1875). The text mentions Ascoli’s *Franco-Provenzali Schizzi* (1874) [2], which traditionally marks the birth of FP as an autonomous Romance language—or rather as a “linguistic type” with “its own historical independence”, as Ascoli will also state. The ambiguity attached to the very concept of “francoprovençal” (autonomous language vs. “mix”) certainly persisted in the following decades (see below), but this article shows that Ascoli himself, who had just revolutionized the traditional bipartition of the Gallo-Romance space, hesitated to “officialize” a third entity; the telegram he sent to the congress attendees only proclaimed: “Viva la Francia d’oc, viva la Francia d’oil!”; the *Gazette* still focused largely on Provençal.

The second occurrence of this precise glottonym can be found in a letter to the editor (July 22, 1895) from the philologist Jean Bonnard, in which he explains that Vaud’s dialects are “part of the Franco-Provençal area, which equates to saying that Vaudois and Provençal have several common characteristics.” He thus insists less on French than on Provençal, which, due to the enthusiasm for the *Félibrige*, indirectly confers prestige to Romandy’s FP dialects. The aura of France’s southern language persists into the twentieth century: Edmond Jaloux, a member of the Académie française who is originally from Marseilles and also lived in Switzerland, establishes a close link between Provençal and the FP language, which almost seems to be encompassed in the Occitan culture (June 9, 1945). After naming various Occitan

dialects, Provençal being the most famous, he adds that “some of Romandy’s dialects have *even* [emphasis added] formed a linguistic group that a scholar, Mr. Ascoli, called Francoprovençal.” The idea of a division of the Gallo-Romance area into three distinct entities fades behind the desire to push Romandy’s FP dialects toward Provençal. This “call of the South” also appears in a tribute paid to the linguist André Desponds (August 16, 1983), where FP is described as what “once was the language of a large part of the regions of *southern France* [emphasis added] and of present Romandy.” Although the FP area does not include the regions traditionally associated with southern France (“le Midi”), the link between FP and the South are clearly displayed—as is the case in some literary works [19].

5.2 FP group and approximate borders

The *Gazette de Lausanne* delimits more precisely than the *Journal de Genève* the much-debated question of the boundaries of FP. The term “francoprovençal” appears often in linguistic contexts (rather than literary ones, e.g.). As the glottonym remains little-known to readers, a definition is generally provided. The term “patois” is quite frequent in combinations like “Franco-Provençal *patois*” (September 30, 1978, September 24, 1954). However, in the 1980s, the word “francoprovençal” seems to have taken root despite its previous attachment to the word “patois.” And the francophone broadcaster Radio suisse romande, which has played an important role in the promotion of local languages, also uses the nomenclature “francoprovençal” in advertisements for its programs (February 27, 1988).

Some articles present FP as a distinct language with precise delimitations, as well as precise criteria to define where FP starts and ends. Details are sometimes given to explain how FP differs from French or Provençal, for example, as regards the Latin tonic “a” that remained “a” in FP as in Provençal (*portâ*—“porter” [carry]) but became “i” in front of a palatal as in French (*tserdzi*—“charger” [charge]) (July 7, 1979). Furthermore, there is sometimes talk of a “Franco-Provençal group”—a less easily understandable concept—and in some articles, the described language boundaries are even wrong in linguistic terms. In one of them, Neuchâtel does not belong to the FP area any more, and the distinction between *oc* and FP is anything but clear, since “the two groups of Romandy’s *patois*” are “one *oil* group, including the dialects of the Jura and the canton of Neuchâtel, one *oc* group, already related to the Franco-Provençal, with the *patois* of Vaud, Fribourg, Valais and Geneva” (January 13, 1973). In another article (August 29, 1977), we read that the *patois* of “northern Jura” belongs to the “Franco-Provençal group,” whereas it is undoubtedly an *oil* dialect.

There are also approximations concerning FP outside Switzerland. Vaud’s *patois* is once described as “belong[ing] to the Franco-Provençal group in the same way as the dialects of Burgundy, [...] Auvergne” (March 16, 1978). If indeed a small part of Burgundy (northern Bresse) does belong to the FP area, this is definitely not true of Auvergne. Often it is no longer clear whether FP is an autonomous language or only one element in the Romance continuum (which it also is), as when one reads that FP “makes the transition” between the *oc* and *oil* languages (July 7, 1979) or that the FP group of dialects “should be attached to French” (July 23, 1955).

5.3 Between discourse on language and discourse on the (little) fatherland

If the question of FP’s territorial boundaries is a central one, it is also because the cross-border nature of FP sometimes competes with identity construction within Romandy. The corpus offers only two examples of the sequence “notre francoprovençal” [our FP] (December 12, 1953, March 30, 1955), while the sequence “notre

patois” or “nos patois” [our *patois*] is much more frequent. There is only the beginning of the construction of a FP “we group” that goes beyond the traditional discourse on *patois* and local identity. The words “we” and “our” are obviously easier to attach to “patois” than to “francoprovençal,” largely because the enumeration of the regions constituting the FP area (necessary since the facts are little-known) forces authors to use a didactic tone that does not facilitate identification, whereas “patois,” being the emotional glottonym that traditionally feeds identity discourse readily, is well suited to the mythification of origins: “Our *patois*, direct descendants of the lower Latin spoken by our Gallo-Roman ancestors [...] [are] often closer to Latin than to French” (August 29, 1981).

In 1907, one author (January 24, 1907) insists on the dignity of “our *patois*”, which are neither “dirty Latin” nor “*patois* from Ile-de-France.” He explains that they may be part of FP but prefers to group them under the unifying glottonym “*romand*,” which applies only to Switzerland. Though metonymy, he designates the whole by a part (*romand* for FP) and symbolically suggests that the language is more Swiss than French (the term “Romand” can only apply to the Swiss part of the FP area, and its French part is not even mentioned): “Romand is interspersed between oil dialects and Provençal.” Since discourse on language has a strong identity dimension, it is deemed important to make the new discourse on FP coincide with older patriotic discourses, whether they be of regional/cantonal ilk (Vaudois) or of (infra-) national type (Romand/Swiss)—the two approaches not being contradictory. Even in the middle of the twentieth century, “Helvetocentrism” remained present. Thus, in an article on Alpine languages (December 26, 1953), the academic Aldo Dami, in order to show his pride for the diversity of the autochthonous languages of Switzerland, also tends to turn FP into a Swiss language, without focusing on the other parts of the FP area. By evoking the kinship (questionable in linguistic terms) between “our Franco-Provençal” and “our Romansh,” he gives FP the benefit of the aura of Romansh, a symbol of Swiss plurilingualism that became a national language in 1938—in order to underscore the uniqueness of Switzerland in regard to its unilingual neighbors, especially nazi Germany and fascist Italy. In so doing, he all but transforms FP into a national language.

Sometimes, one observes less Helvetization than “Vaudization.” One article stresses the autonomy of the Vaudois dialect that supposedly “detached itself from the original trunk in gradual transitions” (December 24, 1907). This “glottogenesis” might not be very compatible with dialectology, but it allows the author to individualize Vaud as a little fatherland. And in another example of “Vaudocentrism” (March 2, 1983), this canton even becomes the very heart of the FP area. According to this article, Vaud was the original home of FP, and its *patois* “radiated beyond the cantonal borders, as far as Savoy, Lyonnais, Franche-Comté and Dauphiné”. Some experts’ comments may have been distorted by editors, but a rewriting of linguistic history for identity purposes is what is at stake here.

5.4 A fragmented awareness of the literary diversity of FP

The lack of awareness in regard to the unity of the FP area also has to do with the fact that there is no “canonical” literature known and recognized throughout the entire FP area. One article evoking the “long centuries [where] our *patois* were only a spoken language” (January 24, 1907) as well as the “poverty” of the FP literary corpus seems to confuse the FP area and Romandy. It evokes the Swiss part of the area, but, either voluntarily or unconsciously, the author does not allude to older texts of undeniable literary quality stemming from non-Swiss parts of the FP area (Bresse, Lyonnais, etc.). The “pride” and identification possibility that could result from the awareness that the FP area has produced “great works” seems hardly

applicable to the discourse used by many Swiss writing about FP dialects, since the construction of a transnational FP literary community is not on the agenda.

The academic Jean-Philippe Chenaux also argues that the FP area is “extremely poor in literary works” (July 7, 1979), because there were no medieval literary centers frequented by troubadours in FP-speaking regions. Indeed, his representation of FP remains Swiss-centered, and despite some references to other regions and the erudition displayed in the article, there is no mention of Marguerite d’Oingt’s work, written in Lyonnais dialect as early as the thirteenth century [20, 21]. The author evokes texts in Vaudois dialect from the eighteenth century, as well as grammars and glossaries, in addition to the codification of spelling or the translation of key texts, but he suggests that these efforts cannot create a corpus of literary works. He does not seem interested in remedying the lack of “good literature” by widening the area of reference or by reflecting on common graphic rules for the entire FP area—certainly a complex undertaking [22]. Does this mean that for most authors, FP—in whatever regional forms or boundaries—is seen as being on the verge of collapse as a culturally relevant phenomenon?

5.5 Inevitable disappearance and impossible revitalization?

In a fairly representative article (August 29, 1981) that evokes the bigger FP context, but still focusses on the “little fatherland,” one author estimates that “our [Vaudois] *patois*” are “dying in indifference” and that they will survive only in a few toponyms or typical expressions. This will happen because the “rural civilization” to which they belonged has almost completely disappeared (a frequently advanced argument). The possibility of creating neologisms is not mentioned, since in any case, *patois vaudois* “will not see the twenty-first century,” due to the lack of critical mass and of support outside a few activist circles. The “flourishing” dialectal theatre may be no more than an entertaining “swan song,” unable to reverse the effects of former language policies and of demographic change. Even if, for some writers, the Vaudois people will “lose their soul” when they lose their “ancestral language,” the author does himself not dramatize and notes with a certain fatalism that despite a few *patois* classes in schools, “there will be no miracle.”

In an article on the *Glossaire des patois de la Suisse romande* (January 13, 1973), the emphasis is put on the importance of a scientific collection of FP varieties. Thus, the conservatory aspect is put forward, but not the paradigm of transmission. The author, who wants to escape the reproach of being unrealistic, explains: “The *patois*, without being resurrected, deserve to be recorded.” The article underscores that paradoxically, the existence of *patoisants* circles is less a sign of vitality than evidence that the dialect is “condemned.” The existence of native speakers is not seen as an encouragement to revitalize the FP language, whose rural orientation is seen as anachronistic. In another article mentioning the “swan song” of Vaudois dialects (July 7, 1979), the author mentions the “sweet regrets of seeing disappear this savory language that our ancestors forgot to teach to their children,” but the nostalgic tone and the celebration of the “rich indigenous vocabulary” do not turn into a more “radical” discourse. The *Association des patoisants vaudois* and the *Conseil des patoisants romands* might “give new life” to FP, the author adds, but he hardly seems to believe it when he quotes conservative writer Gonzague de Reynold, who once stated “it only takes the will of a few men, perhaps just one” to revive the language.

We find more performative passages, displaying the will to build favorable conditions for a revival of FP through the very use of certain words. Thus, in the article “The Vaudois relearn *patois*” (March 16, 1978), the mention of the “growing interest in this old language” and the *patois* courses attended by young people at the Folk High School (*Volkshochschule*) give the illusion that the next generation of *patois*

speakers is ready for combat. Furthermore, the author of “Renaissance of Vaudois *patois*?” (March 31, 1979) welcomes the transition between the declining number of FP native speakers and the few new speakers encouraged by a program from the Education Department—followed by 40 teachers. Nevertheless, his optimism remains cautious.

5.6 The subordination of the FP to French

Various contributors, while internalizing the idea of the inevitable disappearance of FP, insist on placing the cause of FP behind that of (regional or international) French. One of them believes that the Vaudois language can be cultivated “without nostalgia” and especially to better understand the current state of French in Romandy (March 2, 1983). Another one displays his Francophilia in order to legitimize the defense of *Patois* without being seen as reactionary and then makes the archiving and museification of FP a symbol of Swiss patriotism:

There is a very great interest in all of us speaking French [...]. The moral unity, the ease and the pleasure in personal and general relationships then increase. But it is no less urgent to preserve our *patois*. This act of patriotic piety will not save them from death [...]: at least they will remain like the samples of animal species that become rare [...] and [can be seen] behind the windows of a museum (January 24, 1907).

Another author (October 30, 1955) names the benefits of *patois* as a “bulwark” to preserve or even improve the quality of French. According to him, the best pupils are those who, speaking only *patois* in their family, learned French at school instead of learning “faulty” French on the street. FP, far from hindering the command of good French, can “enrich it with its sap, its concrete richness, its penchant for images”—the opposition between picturesque *patois* and rational French is a classical one. Moreover, he believes that *patois* do not weaken Romans in their struggle against Germanization and rather make it possible to contain the “Germanic push” at the language border, since “our peasant populations” that are faithful to “the accent of their race” stay more attached to “their corner of land.” And he concludes: “to serve the French language we love, let us participate in the defence of our mother tongue, Franco-Provençal.”

The FP question often reflects the opposition between (Parisian) French and regional French, as well as different forms of purism. To answer a reader who legitimates the use of regional French—but not FP—in Switzerland (“One must speak Vaudois,” December 14, 1943), one author recalls the superior status of standard French. While displaying his tenderness for the “old words of the land,” he specifies that it resembles something “devoted to ancient objects.” He advises FP defenders to combat “Provençal terms” (one finds again the ambiguity of the FP concept) as well as abhorred Germanisms. To discredit the “defender of Vaudoisisms,” he imagines a text written by a communal administration in a French language full of abstruse regional words, whereas its role should be to “maintain communication between individuals.” He disagrees with those who believe that standard French is “imported into Romandy.” While conceding that the “fixity of an idiom” does not exist, he refuses that Switzerland’s Francoprovençalized French be seen as an autonomous variety of French under the pretext that the Romans sometimes use “turns of phrase that we would not write,” and he invites everybody to take better care of the French language.

In another text on regional French (April 3, 1951), a journalist refuses the creation of an *Office romand de la langue française* as well as the “triumphant” defense of local languages and asks writers to express themselves in order to be “understood effortlessly in Paris and Lausanne, Brussels and Lyon.” Without denying

the historical importance of FP, he gives it a subordinate place. The symbolic power pyramid remains intact, and the author is more concerned with repelling Germanisms than cultivating Vaudois expressions:

“Vaudois [as] our language” has its own value, provided that it remains in its right place: a modest place, that alongside *pure French* [italics in the original] [...] Breton, Provençal, Basque have the right to claim, without, however, [...] wanting to occupy the first rank. [...] We have the right to pay tribute to the colour of old and exquisitely savoury words from home. But our duty is to fight against our worst enemies: Germanisms. [...] We will then more effectively serve literary French.

The specter of Germanization is also raised in a text on a French-speaking Switzerland assertedly “threatened in its linguistic integrity” (June 13, 1953). The author refers to the decline of the so-called universality of French language, due to the “nationalist outbursts” of minority groups. He is ironic about UNESCO promoting “indigenous languages as languages of culture”—and in that perspective, FP also appears to him fairly irrelevant. Yet, according to this author, FP has the merit of promoting “good bilingualism”, since FP was traditionally learned *before* French, which children then acquired at school in its correct form. As for “bad bilingualism” (especially with French and German), it consists of learning two idioms simultaneously, in “thinking according to two mentalities” and thus impoverishing expression by privileging statements having “equivalents in both languages.” Switching and mixing languages can only feed “the penetration of German into our mores,” weakening “the will to remain true to ourselves,” and even bring about the “disappearance of Romandy.” The instrumentalization of FP (which is by no means a competitor for the French language) makes it possible to consolidate an imagined community largely based on French monolingualism. And this can be done all the more easily if the main purpose is to preserve FP as a heritage and not to keep it alive and visible in all sectors of society.

5.7 What role for the Aosta Valley, what parallel between the corpora?

While Savoy is very little present in the VD corpus, the Aosta Valley occupies quite an important place. This Italian region sometimes seems to be regarded as the FP El Dorado, as a counter-model to a Swiss context where FP is rapidly declining. We read that the *patois* speakers of Valais know that their *patois* “is exactly the same” in the Aosta Valley, where one can find an “absolutely pure Francoprovençal” (October 20, 1984). As questionable as these statements are, they show the importance of representations of a “true language”—associated with a place that guarantees the authenticity.

But the Valley also gives the opportunity to describe sociolinguistic realities beyond Romandy. In an article entitled “The Aosta Valley: a cultural genocide” (August 9, 1974), the author presents Romans as “sensitized” to the fate of language minorities (due to their minority status in Switzerland). He invites them to be even more so in the case of the Aosta Valley, since in 1860, its inhabitants “spoke French, or the local Franco-Provençal dialect.” He describes the Italianization that was exacerbated by fascism and was still going on after 1945, as well as the fight for a status guaranteeing at least a few hours of French language at school, whereas FP was still—temporarily—widely spoken. FP is thus presented as a substitute language likely to fight the “cultural genocide” (against FP- and French-speaking Valdostans), happening “two hours by car from us.” Just as with Romans refusing German in Switzerland, FP is adorned with the virtues of resistance.

And in a letter about the Aosta Valley as a “forgotten homeland of Francophonie” (August 15, 1974), one reader describes a cross-border region “ennobled by the soul of the same Alpine civilization [as in Switzerland],” evoking less Savoy than the links between Romandy and the Aosta Valley, “our two regions of the same

language.” And the Romands, who did not have to fight to preserve French and who “neglected [their] *patois*,” should at least have at heart the support of their “language brothers.”

6. Conclusion

As we have seen in the *Journal de Genève*, the glottonym “*patois*,” applicable to various linguistic situations, has not disappeared from the vocabulary of the French-speaking Swiss with the emergence of “*francoprovençal*.” The newspaper has nonetheless witnessed the evolution of the sociopolitical discourse on the nature and the future of this ancestral language. In the nineteenth century, as the GE-1 corpus (“*patois*”) illustrates, the identity construction based on language applied mainly to the canton (Geneva), to Romandy or to a transnational space limited to Geneva and Savoy. In the twentieth century, judging by the GE-2 corpus (“*francoprovençal*”), the reference to FP extended the symbolic identity construction to the entire FP area, whose political heart seemed to oscillate between Geneva, Aosta and Savoy—the more distant French regions being little taken into account. We also observe that the editors considered with a certain fatalism the disappearance of *patois romand*, but the idea of a revitalization of FP (on top of its conservation) did make a timid breakthrough in the 1990s. Nevertheless, in view of the small number of articles devoted to the question, the general indifference to the FP cause in Geneva and Romandy remains striking.

In addition, the *Gazette de Lausanne* attests that within a century, the foundations of the construction of a cross-border FP area were laid. This can be seen especially in the genuine interest for the Valdostan neighbors; however, the construction remains unfinished. Like the Genevans, the Vaudois seem widely accustomed to the impending extinction of their ancestral language. Vaudois’ construction of an imagined community is based on the identification with Romandy, but mainly with Vaud, and it no longer depends on fidelity to the dialect, but more on an interest in regional French. It should also be noted that the reference to Savoy is very little present in the *Gazette de Lausanne* and does not feed any interest for a transnational FP entity (or for other FP-speaking French regions). Whereas Vaud appears as self-sufficient to develop its own discourse on the traditional language, Geneva, because of its common history with Savoy and its geography (a small canton, almost a Swiss enclave with strong bonds to French neighbors), cannot rely only on itself to do so. This latter context seems more favorable to the construction of a cross-border community.

In order to better measure the evolution of language and identity representations in Romandy, further research could be carried out in the archives of the daily newspaper *Le temps*—which continues the legacy of both the *Journal* and the *Gazette*. With the growing awareness of the rapid destruction of the world’s linguistic heritage [23] and with the debate on the European charter for regional or minority languages (which was ratified by Switzerland but with few references to FP), there have probably been further reflections on revitalization. One could probably notice the less-discreet presence of the glottonym “*arpitan*”—whose ancestor “*harpetan*” was mentioned in the *Journal de Genève*, but not in the *Gazette de Lausanne*—and references to the imagined (proto)nation “*Arpitania*.” Some new speakers very active on the Internet still advocate this concept in order to make identification with the language easier and to put an end to the misleading associations with Provence [18]—which, as we saw, are present in both corpora; these new speakers are also among the strongest defenders of a unified spelling (called ORB, see [24]) for the whole of the FP area. No one can say if the new glottonym will finally prevail in

the regions associated with the language that most academics still name “francoprovençal.” The references to *Félibrige* in both corpora (especially in the *Journal de Genève*) suggest that in order to understand the evolution of representations of local languages in Romandy and beyond, it remains useful to remember that the Gallo-Romance area is still a linguistic continuum with some arbitrary dialectal borders. Thus, the term “francoprovençal,” despite its unattractive character, is not completely devoid of virtue when it comes to thinking about the political and sociological conditions that “make” languages exist.


To sum up, it should be stressed that in Switzerland, due to the presence of various local or regional discourses on “patois,” there were powerful centripetal forces that hampered the rise of a widespread awareness of the unity of the language throughout the three countries concerned. The centrifugal forces producing FP language representations that went beyond the Swiss frame of reference did exist but were obviously never supported by any strong social demand. There was hardly even a discourse on Romandy as a place where another more- or less-unified national language could have taken shape—based on the model of the emergence of Romansh as an official language in the Canton of Grisons and at the federal level. It might partly be because there are *several* French- or FP-speaking cantons. But one should also underline the extent to which the internalization of the French unilingual model (as opposed to the lasting diglossic coexistence of languages in German-speaking Switzerland) interfered with a “Swiss idea” that was—in theory—more open to language diversity. Nevertheless, it can be argued the careful voices that somehow nourished a spirit of resistance against linguistic homogenization still have relevance in a Swiss society where individual and collective plurilingualism is by no means a thing of the past, in regard to traditional languages, but also because the number of speakers of some immigrant languages now exceeds that of speakers of both Romansh and Francoprovençal.

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