

## Language under the Administrative Gaze: State, Statistics, and the Politics of Language under Napoleon

The Napoleonic period witnessed a flourishing of efforts to produce knowledge about society. The enlightened gaze of administrators and amateur scholars was turned towards the territory and population of the Empire in an effort to describe not only the economic situation but also the social and cultural practices of inhabitants. The period saw a concerted effort to make society ‘legible’ in James C. Scott’s terminology.<sup>1</sup> Some efforts aimed at the collection of information about society were directly related to the material concerns of the state or of the management of society. The Napoleonic cadastre, for example, was intended to make tax collection more efficient, while population figures allowed quotas for conscription to be drawn up.<sup>2</sup> The centrepiece of this effervescence of social description—the departmental statistics—went beyond the collation of numbers in relation to population and production, and sought to describe local social practices. The production of these descriptive statistical tracts was inextricably linked to the French state, since they were commissioned by the *Bureau de la statistique*, which was part of the Ministry of the Interior. As Marie-Noëlle Bourguet has argued, these descriptive statistics became increasingly ethnographic in character.<sup>3</sup> This reflected the increasing interest in descriptions of the social and cultural practices of the French population evident in the writings of travellers and scholars of the period.<sup>4</sup>

A common characteristic of all these efforts was the process of observation. This involved not just description, but the imposition

of an analytical grid on society, a scheme of questions that constituted a technology of seeing and which governed the production of knowledge. It also involved a form of geographical displacement from centre to periphery, either in the form of the observers themselves, be they metropolitan travellers or administrators, or of information through administrative or scholarly correspondence. A vision of society was thus created at the centre that could then be exported back down to the region. This was significant because, as this chapter will argue, the vision implied a course of action; it constructed local society as a particularity and valorised the notion of progress and homogeneity.

As the period went on, language featured with increasing prominence in these descriptions of society. The way in which the population communicated became an object of enquiry for the administrators who compiled the departmental statistics and, in turn, the integration and modernisation of the population of the Empire was understood to involve the spread of the French language. This interest reached its high point with the enquiry into the languages of the Empire, conducted by the *Bureau de la statistique* between 1806 and 1812 under the influence of its then chief, Charles-Etienne Coquebert de Montbret and his son, Eugène. This chapter will situate this effort to describe the linguistic practices of society in the broader production of social knowledge during the period, and especially the state-directed departmental statistics, and the link between these projects and efforts to unify the culture and language of the population.

## THE PRODUCTION OF SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE UNDER NAPOLEON

The statistical enquiry as practised under the Directory and Empire was not new. It owed a great deal to the statistical treatises of administrators during the *Ancien régime*, and to the enquiries of the intendants carried out under Louis XIV.<sup>5</sup> These studies were generally little concerned with society, focusing instead on the immediate concerns of the monarchy such as taxation and agricultural production.<sup>6</sup> In the second half of the eighteenth century, the scope and audience of such descriptive practices was transformed.

Until the last decades of the eighteenth century, statistics had been the secret of the state. A crucial turning point, according to Marie-Noëlle

Bourguet, was the 1781 publication by Louis XVI's Finance Minister, Jacques Necker, of his famous *Compte rendu de l'état du royaume et des affaires publiques* (Account of the state of the realm and public affairs).<sup>7</sup> Necker's work was not the first account of the royal finances to be published before the Revolution, but its large circulation placed the administrative knowledge of the state prominently within the public sphere.<sup>8</sup> The new impulse towards publicity in state affairs continued into the Napoleonic period, manifested in the annual report or *Exposé de la situation de l'Empire*, presented to the legislative corps by the Minister of the Interior.

Earlier iterations of these reports amounted to little more than a justification of Government policy over the preceding year, and the benevolent impact of the Napoleonic state upon society was simply asserted. In 1804, for example, it was claimed that the encouragement of the government was leading to the improvement of agriculture and to the introduction of improved breeds of livestock, while the return of peace and civil order brought about by the Napoleonic regime encouraged charity and thus the diminution of the number of vagrants.<sup>9</sup> The regime, in other words, sought to claim legitimacy on the basis of social progress, upon the improvement of society. The character of the reports changed in the later years of the Napoleonic period, after the appointment of Jean-Pierre de Montalivet as Minister of the Interior in 1809. Montalivet sought not only to assert the progress brought about by government activity but to substantiate it with reference to statistics on population, agricultural production, commerce and public spending on improvements such as roads and bridges.<sup>10</sup> In each of these categories, 1789 was taken as the starting point and the aim was to demonstrate how the new regime had improved the country by increasing the level of population or agricultural production.<sup>11</sup>

The new emphasis on the public exercise of governmental authority was joined by an increasing desire to describe the social and cultural practices of the population. This was manifested most obviously in enlightened travelogues, and in the work of local learned societies and scholars.<sup>12</sup> An ethnographic interest in the lives of the rural population of France became particularly marked in the travel writing of the 1780s. The enlightened travelogue as a genre had focused predominantly on urban life up to this point, but with publications such as Le Grand d'Aussy's *Voyage dans l'Auvergne*, a new desire to seek out the 'savage' parts of France, to describe and account for the practices of the French peasantry, came to prominence.<sup>13</sup> This ethnographic impulse profoundly marked the production of social knowledge during

the Napoleonic period, including a number of volumes of the departmental statistics and the enquiry of the Coqueberts into the languages of France.<sup>14</sup>

Pre-Revolutionary ethnographic interest took imprinted itself on the official production of social knowledge in the form of the departmental statistics that took shape under a succession of interior ministers during and after the Revolutionary period. Based on the genesis of the genre as described by Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, a number of different types of source may be distinguished. Departmental statistical enquiries were originally conceived during the Revolution with the division of the regions into departments. The earliest enquiries on the departmental level were aimed at grasping the territorial extent of regions to facilitate the setting of tax levels. The outbreak of war and the *levée en masse* brought about an increased interest in population levels and in the distribution of resources that might be requisitioned. However, it was only with the arrival of François de Neufchâteau at the Ministry of the Interior that the widespread composition of statistical surveys at the departmental level began. His circular of the 26th Germinal Year VII (15th April 1799) called for the compilation of summary descriptions of the departments of the Republic.<sup>15</sup> Lucien Bonaparte, following his installation as Minister of the Interior in place of François de Neufchâteau after the coup d'état of the 18th Brumaire, issued a new set of questions to guide the compilation of departmental statistics. He also established the *Bureau de la statistique* to archive and coordinate the fruits of this descriptive effort.<sup>16</sup>

Up to this point the departmental statistics, the summary descriptions composed according to the directives of François de Neufchâteau tended to be fairly unambitious texts. Many of these publications, such as the summary description from the Department of the Aube, which appeared in September 1799, totalled only twenty pages.<sup>17</sup> Even the longer works, such as the summary description from the Department of the Gard, were no longer than eighty pages.<sup>18</sup> They were largely confined to a simple topography of the department followed by an account of the agricultural, commercial and industrial activity taking place in the region and perhaps a few paragraphs on the morals of the population. This changed in 1801, with the intervention of yet another Minister of the Interior, Jean-Antoine Chaptal. His circular of the 19th Germinal year IX (9th April 1801) gave a new structure to the departmental statistics, with five chapters: (1) a topographical description; (2) a detailed breakdown of the population by age,

sex and marital status; (3) a description of state of society; (4) agricultural production; and (5) industrial and commercial activity.<sup>19</sup> The third chapter in particular, describing the state of the population of a given department, marked a broadening of the scope of the enquiry. The details of social customs and practices, of hygiene, education, literacy, criminality and of the character of the inhabitants of a department were now scrutinised by administrators. These statistical descriptions were substantially more detailed than the works that had preceded them. The statistical memoir published in the 1802 by the Prefect of the Moselle was 200 pages long. It contained a lengthy description of the charitable activities, criminality and literacy of the population, concluding with remarks on religion and language, illustrating the changing nature of the genre.<sup>20</sup>

The departmental statistics compiled and published through the Ministry of the Interior were joined by a host of local publications, many of which were also the product of individuals involved with the local prefecture. These works generally took the form of a statistical annual, containing information on local market days, weights and measures and office holders in addition to a statistical description of the department. The description itself, however, generally conformed to the pattern laid down at the centre. The 1807 statistical annual for the Hautes-Pyrénées, for example, was simply a revised version of the 1801 departmental survey submitted to the Minister of the Interior.<sup>21</sup> The statistical table from the department of Dyle adopted a different format, presenting information in the form of a table rather than a text, yet the logic of the enquiry remained, with population broken down by geographical locale and a short series of observations on the language and customs of the region included at the end of a 'précis statistique'.<sup>22</sup>

The prefecture was a pivotal site in the compilation of the departmental statistics. Most descriptions, like the work of Colchen on the Moselle, were composed under the direction of the prefect. The majority of the rest were delegated to the secretary of the prefecture, as was the case with the accounts published on the departments of the Nord, Vendée, Dordogne, and Lot-et-Garonne.<sup>23</sup> Occasionally, a local scholar or other official would be chosen to complete the work. The Statistical Annual of the Seine-Inférieure was written by Vitalis, a professor at the Lycée, while the chief civil engineer of the Department of the Gard was responsible for the summary description of his department.<sup>24</sup> While a figure in the prefecture directed the project, the statistical description was always a collaborative endeavour. The individual compiling the statistical

description of the department would always lean on the knowledge and expertise of local figures. This meant carrying out a correspondence with the mayors within the department, asking them to respond to questionnaires and provide information. As Dalphonse, Prefect of the Indre, explained, “I have put within the reach of all the mayors, all the questions relating to the Statistic. I have received all their responses; I have compared them all”.<sup>25</sup> The clearest evidence of this practice is to be found in the correspondence of Christophe de Villeneuve, the Prefect of the Bouches du Rhône under the restored Bourbon monarchy who published a multivolume statistical description of the department in the 1820s.<sup>26</sup> In writing this work, Villeneuve carried out an extensive correspondence with the mayors of his department, distributing questionnaires on topics such as the practice of village festivals, the etymologies of place names and the historical monuments of the region.<sup>27</sup>

Information not obtained through correspondence was collected through direct observation. Where the author was the prefect, this would generally take place during the annual administrative tour of the department, a journey undertaken primarily to oversee administrative activities such as conscription. Dalphonse, for example, describes how intensive travelling across his department allowed him to complete his survey: “for four consecutive months, I have travelled across the Department of Indre; I have visited all its communes, all its establishments, all its roads: wherever I went, I saw, I interrogated, I collected”.<sup>28</sup> The practice of statistical description was, therefore, closely related to the enlightened travelogue. Some of the best-known travelogues of the Napoleonic period began as administrative voyages. One such example is Jacques Cambry’s *Voyage dans le Finistère*, published in 1799.<sup>29</sup> Cambry was a government administrator, fulfilling various roles during the Revolution before serving as Prefect of the Oise between 1800 and 1802. During his time as prefect, Cambry authored a two-volume description of the Oise, a work fitting neatly into the Napoleonic practice of departmental statistical description.<sup>30</sup> His better-known *Voyage dans le Finistère* underscores the porous nature of distinctions between administrative description and enlightened travelogue. Cambry’s *Voyage* was initially undertaken as a survey of surviving monuments and artworks in the department following the vandalism of the Terror.<sup>31</sup> When it reappeared in 1799 as *Voyage*, the work was suffused with the romanticised celtomania that would later permeate the work of the *Académie celtique*. Following a strand of eighteenth century antiquarian thought,

the members of the *Académie* held that all of France's languages were ultimately derived from Celtic, and that the influence of the Romans had obscured the immense cultural and philosophical achievements of the Celts. This Celtic heritage belonged exclusively to France, and was redolent of the kind of 'golden age' sought out by romantic nationalists in the nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> Yet contemporaries also understood Cambry's *Voyage* as a contribution to the production of statistical knowledge. The reviewer of this 'useful book' in the *Décade Philosophique*, having lamented the impoverished state of France's interior, claimed that "if a similar work on all the other departments existed, we could see the great work of interior improvement as already considerably advanced".<sup>33</sup>

Travel writing and statistical description were therefore understood by contemporaries as closely related activities, and this relationship was manifested in a common epistemology centred on the practice of enlightened observation. It was enlightened observation that allowed the production and distribution of social knowledge, by providing a grid through which accounts of society could be structured. The paradigmatic form of enlightened observation under Napoleon was the questionnaire. The departmental statistics were themselves structured by the questionnaires of François de Neufchâteau and Chaptal, which determined the features of society to be described.<sup>34</sup> The questionnaire became a ubiquitous feature of scholarly, as well as administrative, attempts to describe society during the period. The publication in 1800 of Joseph-Marie Degerando's *Considérations sur les diverses méthodes à suivre dans l'observation des peuples sauvages* (Considerations of the diverse methods to be followed in the observation of savage peoples), which contained a series of questions about the beliefs and practices of inhabitants of the New World intended to structure the work of enlightened explorers, is often cited as an early cornerstone of anthropology.<sup>35</sup> The popular customs and practices of the French population were the object of the questionnaire compiled by the *Académie celtique* and circulated to the provincial scholars and administrators who formed the membership of the *Académie*.<sup>36</sup> The questionnaire was even distributed through the state bureaucracy in the Kingdom of Italy.<sup>37</sup> Towards the end of the period, Volney made the connections between the observations of enlightened travellers and the administrative statistics of the Napoleonic state explicit with the publication of his statistical questionnaire for travellers.<sup>38</sup> Volney's list of 135 questions for the traveller to answer about each location he visited clearly demonstrates the

observational practice of the period. The topics mirrored the departmental statistics, opening with geographical information such as latitude and longitude, before broadening out to examine agricultural and industrial production, population and even cultural practices like reading groups.<sup>39</sup>

The questionnaire, therefore, was intended to structure the practices of enlightened observation across a range of activity, from the descriptive statistics of the prefects and Ministry of the Interior to the writings of travellers and antiquarians interested in popular culture. Questionnaires could be disseminated either through correspondence or through the personal movement of the observer, and they were the central technology in the production of knowledge about society during the period. They were above all a technology of seeing that allowed common techniques of observation to be implemented across the Empire and even beyond. The questionnaire shaped the enlightened gaze of administrators and scholars, producing a standardised form of knowledge that could be transmitted back to the centre where it could be arranged as a coherent and public vision of society.

### SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL IMPROVEMENT

The paradoxical effect of this very public attempt to describe society, carried out to a significant extent by state actors, was to establish the state as something acting upon society from the outside. It served at once as a diagnosis of society, a way of identifying ills to be cured, and at the same time as a legitimisation of state power. The ideological justification of the authority of the state, and particularly the post-revolutionary state, was a central feature of the *Statistiques départementales* as conceived by Chaptal. As with Montalivet's *Exposé*, the aim was to document the condition of the country as a whole and compare it with 1789 in order to assess the impact of the regime's policies. The legitimacy of the regime was thus tied to the idea of social progress and improvement.<sup>40</sup> This tendency was particularly marked in the annexed departments. The Prefect of the Rhin-et-Moselle was particularly sensitive to the comparison of conditions before the Revolution with the situation under French rule. He confessed that literacy rates had fallen since the arrival of the French troops, and that the occupation had 'demoralised' the country.<sup>41</sup> Yet he was certain that the benevolent impact of French governance was making itself felt. In Koblenz, he claimed, prosperity was beginning to flourish because "the Government and genius of France is regenerating her".<sup>42</sup>



Perhaps the most notable benefit of French rule, however, was the banishment of superstitions and archaic customs. As the Prefect wrote:

If the Revolution, the passage and arrival of the armies demoralised this department, as one claims, they have at least made a powerful contribution to the destruction of a large number of superstitions of which many inhabitants were victims, and reminded them of more simple and sage religious and political ideas.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, according to the Prefect, tales of ghosts, spirits and exorcisms, the ‘charlatanism’ that impeded progress in agriculture, were swept away by the arms of French reason. The French state, in this formulation, was a tool for the enlightenment and improvement of society.

This justification for state authority was closely related to the practice of ‘diagnosing’ society as it emerged from Napoleonic social description. Commentators used clinical metaphors such as ‘diagnosis’ and ‘cure’ during this period. As the reviewer of Jacques Cambry’s *Voyage* in the *Décade philosophique* wrote, in praising his descriptions of popular customs, “to cure you need to know”.<sup>44</sup> In common with the departmental statistics, Cambry identified projects and improvements requiring the support of the state. As Sharif Gemie observed, “every second page” saw Cambry bemoan the lack of some public facility.<sup>45</sup> The diagnosis of Breton ‘backwardness’ served to legitimate state action on society; it was the necessary first step towards ‘amelioration’. Administrators like Cambry even claimed that it was in the interests of the Bretons who he described to place their conditions of life before the reading public, because this was the only way to redress the Parisian focus of government. As he wrote, “I reveal the needs of these good peasants [...] the countries neighbouring Paris get everything, because they have advocates amongst the government”.<sup>46</sup>

As with the Prefect of the Rhin-et-Moselle celebrating the decline of superstition as a product of French rule, so Cambry’s statements on the ‘absurdities’ of peasant ‘superstitions’ demonstrate how the impulse towards improvement manifested as a desire to censor and regulate cultural practices. According to Cambry, the population of lower Brittany was notable for its superstitions: “several particular absurdities characterise each canton of the universe; Brittany unites them all”.<sup>47</sup> The solution proposed by Cambry was education, which he regarded as ‘a panacea against despotism’.<sup>48</sup> For Cambry, the

‘absurdities’ of popular culture arose from ignorance exacerbated by a lack of education. As Cambry wrote of the district of Morlaix where “the education of children is neglected, totally abandoned”, and as a result “all the prejudices are taught in the markets: the maids still tell stories of ghosts, of miracles; filling children’s brains with errors”.<sup>49</sup> It was ignorance that the government needed to combat, and these ‘absurdities’ would have to be reformed by the government if it were it to avoid ‘despotism’ and ameliorate social problems; “the most odious of governments is one established on nonsense. In the final analysis, ignorance is the worst of all evils, and the source of all the crimes”.<sup>50</sup> In Cambry’s account, Brittany existed in a state of backwardness equal to the most isolated reaches of the world, and its inhabitants suffered comparable hardships:

When you read, in travellers’ tales, the description of the unfortunate lives of the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, the unlucky ones who vegetate on the sea rocks in the south, the unfortunate Lapps buried under the snow, of Kamchatkans fed on rotten fish; you sometimes cried out: Oh France! Too fortunate is he who was born in your bosom, in this so fertile land... You are unaware, in this very same France, of the state of life of the inhabitants of Pontusval, and of the coast of Britany in general.<sup>51</sup>

Cambry attributed this backwardness to despotism and ignorance. He railed, for example, against the inadequate dress favoured by the peasantry, “which only covered half their buttocks,” and which:

was invented under the system of feudal government, by imperial lords, interested in suppressing [the peasants], to constrict all type of desire, to put them away from temptation. [...] It is this principle, one says, which forced women in China to only ever wear tiny slippers; concepts of tyranny are the same anywhere on Earth.

Cambry thus interpreted cultural diversity as evidence of feudal abuses, the ‘irrational’ and impractical clothing springing logically from the unmitigated dominion of ‘tyranny’.

Cambry’s remarks were fairly typical of the way in which popular culture was constructed as an object of study in the Departmental Statistics. Louis Texier-Olivier, Prefect of the Haute-Vienne and author of the 1808 departmental statistics, made use of similar clichés about the

simplicity of the inhabitants of the department: “Slow to understand, the inhabitants of the department of Haute-Vienne do however possess a natural spirit”.<sup>52</sup> According to Texier-Olivier, the inhabitants of the Haute-Vienne could be rescued from their slowness and simplicity only through exposure to French science and civilisation; “with a meticulous education, they will be no different from other French people, who are accepted as having the greatest aptitude for the Sciences and the Arts”.<sup>53</sup> The production of social knowledge under Napoleon reveals a central ideological tenet of Napoleonic governance. Efficient and effective administration of society by the state, it was argued, could lead to the improvement of society. The description of archaic and backwards cultural practices gave purpose to French rule, both within France and in the annexed departments. As scholars such as Michael Broers and Stuart Woolf have observed, this kind of superiority pervaded the mentality of administrators across the Empire during the period. It was what they believed made the enlightened rule of the French necessary.<sup>54</sup> It also made the cultural integration of the populations of the Empire an object of Napoleonic rule, and this meant the spreading the French language.

### LANGUAGE IN THE NAPOLEONIC STATISTICS

The study of the spoken language of the French, as opposed to the grammatical, standardised language of written production, gained prominence in France with the 1775 publication of an essay on the patois of Ban de la Roche by Jérémie-Jacques Oberlin.<sup>55</sup> Oberlin’s essay, concerned with the *langue d’oïl* variety spoken at the easternmost edge of Alsace, was the first study dedicated explicitly to one of France’s regional languages. Oberlin began his work with the following disclaimer: “If it were a question of giving a detailed description of different patois, which distinguish the provinces of the Kingdom, in order to do so it would have been necessary to have an Academy formed of scholars from each province, as well as simultaneously having people of the lowliest backgrounds”.<sup>56</sup> Such a proposition made it clear that the distinction between the French-speaking and non French-speaking populations of France was a social, as well as an ethnic one. Authentic samples of those languages particular to various provinces of France could only be found amongst those of lowly extraction, ‘*le peuple*’, but it was to the educated that the study of such languages would be entrusted. This was a trope that surfaced repeatedly in studies of regional language and culture in

France throughout the period. For example, in an article on the ‘*breton-armoricain*’ accent one member of the *Académie celtique* observed “that when speaking with a Breton accent, I always imagine this language in the mouths of the farmers, the artisans and the working people, for whom it is natural”.<sup>57</sup> This was because those who habitually spoke in French tended to employ “the quality and the accent of this language when they wish to speak Breton, circumstances which make it lose a lot of its originality”.<sup>58</sup>

Linguistic diversity, therefore, was understood as a feature of popular culture in the same way as the superstitions and customs described by figures like Cambry and Texier-Olivier. This made language a legitimate site for the enlightened intervention of the state, something that became clear during the Revolution, when Abbé Grégoire circulated a series of 43 questions on the patois of France.<sup>59</sup> Grégoire’s questionnaire, which was printed in the newspaper *Le patriote français* and attracted responses from across France, predominantly from the Societies of Friends of the Constitution, was conceived as the first step in a campaign to homogenise the linguistic culture of France.<sup>60</sup> The questionnaire itself made this goal explicit, requiring the respondent to consider the religious and political effect of the destruction of the patois and to reflect on how this destruction might be brought about.<sup>61</sup> Yet Grégoire also sought to collect a range of information on the use of France’s other languages across contexts like the church and schoolroom, as well as the proverbs and vocabulary characterising popular speech and the printed material produced in these languages.<sup>62</sup>

Grégoire’s survey, along with his report on the necessity and the means of annihilating the patois and universalising the French language, which he presented to the convention in 1794, have been understood as manifestations of a state linguistic policy aimed at the displacement of regional languages with French.<sup>63</sup> Grégoire offered a damning verdict of the French people’s ability to speak French:

We can guarantee with no exaggeration that at least six million French people, above all those in the countryside, are ignorant of the national language; that an equal number are quasi incapable of holding an extended conversation; that, in the end, the number of those who do speak it does not exceed three million, and that the number of those who write it correctly is likely even less.

This posed an obvious problem for the revolutionaries, for while it was desirable that all Frenchmen should be citizens capable of occupying places in the political administration they would still need to know French:

If these places are held by men who are incapable of expressing themselves, of writing in the national language, will the rights of citizens be truly guaranteed by acts where the process of drafting will introduce the improper usage of terms, the imprecision of ideas, in a word all the symptoms of ignorance?

It is telling, however, that Grégoire distinguished not simply between those who are able to speak French and those who are not, but also between those who are able to use French ‘properly’ and those whose grasp of the language is so tenuous as to invite error—an “imprecision of ideas” that could spell political disaster. Public administration was properly the role of the educated who could use language ‘correctly’.

While language was not an explicit object of the Napoleonic departmental statistics, the frequency with which it appeared in the studies of the period demonstrates its enduring relevance as an object of official concern. Of 87 departmental statistics published between the year VII and 1813, 40 describe the language of the department’s inhabitants. The geographical distribution of these statistics, shown in Fig. 2.1, unsurprisingly reflects the linguistic geography of the Empire. Concern over language was expressed predominantly, although not exclusively, in the Occitan-speaking south of the country, in Brittany, and in the annexed departments of the Rhineland, Belgium and the Netherlands. The map also reveals the irregularity with which concerns about language were expressed in the South, with the departmental statistics for a number of departments in Occitan-speaking territory making no mention of language. It should also be noted that the language of the population was an object of administrative enquiry in several departments of northern France where dialects of the *langue d’oïl* were spoken, such as the Haute-Saône and the Deux-Sèvres.<sup>64</sup>

Language in the departmental statistics of the Napoleonic period appeared as an obstacle to the process of improvement upon which government legitimacy rested. In his work on the Belgian department of the Lys, the Prefect Justin de Viry complained that rural dwellers in the area refused agricultural improvements like new livestock breeds because of ignorance fermented by a lack of knowledge of the French language.<sup>65</sup> Integrating the culturally and linguistically diverse populations



**Fig. 2.1** Language in the Departmental Statistics (Year VII; 1813). *Source* *Statistiques départementales*

of the Empire meant spreading the French language. This position was expressed with particular clarity by Boucqueau, Prefect of the Rhenish department of the Rhin-et-Moselle. As he wrote:

This is the moment when the people subject to the same laws will speak the same language; it is only in so doing that, with nothing distinguishing them, they will adopt all the same tastes and customs; that communication between them will be more agreeable, and that they will form a homogeneous unity which will truly make up one nation.<sup>66</sup>

The Napoleonic project as understood by figures such as Viry, therefore, involved the homogenisation of not only legal conventions and government structures, but also cultural practices such as language, and the description of society was a crucial first step in this project of linguistic integration.

## THE COQUEBERTS AND THE LANGUAGES OF THE NAPOLEONIC EMPIRE

It was from this context that the enquiry into the languages of the French empire, conducted by the *Bureau de la statistique* between 1806 and 1812, emerged. The enquiry is commonly associated with the name Coquebert de Montbret. However, it was in reality the work of two individuals, Charles-Étienne Coquebert de Montbret, who ran the *Bureau de la statistique* from 1806 until 1810, when he was posted to Amsterdam to administer the imperial blockade in the trading cities along the Roer, and his son and employee at the Office, Eugène.<sup>67</sup> It is unclear where the initial impulse for the enquiry originated, since a letter from November 1807 Charles-Étienne Coquebert de Montbret credits the idea to Champagny, the then-Minister of the Interior.<sup>68</sup> Yet it was undoubtedly the Coqueberts who gave the enquiry its shape, for the draft versions of the Office's correspondence are almost entirely written in the hand of either father or son. Furthermore, the Coqueberts retained an interest in the subject during the restoration, publishing an essay on the linguistic geography of France in 1831, which is attributed to Eugène in the catalogue of the National Library, but may have been the work of Charles-Etienne, in view of a similar manuscript in his hand.<sup>69</sup>

Disentangling the efforts of one Coquebert from another is an equally difficult proposition when it comes to the realisation of the enquiry itself. Upon the dissolution of the *Bureau de la statistique* in 1812, Eugène wrote a report for the Minister of the Interior outlining what had been completed so far and asking to be allowed to continue the work in his new posting. In an unsigned letter accompanying this report, it was claimed that "it is M. Eugène Coquebert who undertook this correspondence, it is he who united and classified all the information".<sup>70</sup> The largest share of the draft correspondence relating to the enquiry was written in the hand of the younger Coquebert, and certainly one may presume that the task fell to him after his father's departure from the Office in 1810, although much of the earliest correspondence is in Charles-Étienne's hand.<sup>71</sup> The elder Coquebert's

script is also evident in corrections made to Eugène's drafts.<sup>72</sup> Father and son, therefore, worked together on the enquiry, and while Eugène may have been more closely involved with its workings, particularly in its last two years, Charles-Étienne's seniority was also evident.

Charles-Étienne Coquebert de Montbret was an assiduous amateur geographer. The elder Coquebert owned a collection of 856 maps, and took voyages around France and Ireland, always accompanied by selection of these maps on which to mark down the geological, agricultural and linguistic features he encountered.<sup>73</sup> Upon returning home, he would add details from travelogues and his own correspondence. He was a founding member of the Society of Geography in 1821, collaborated with Omalius d'Hallo on the creation of geological maps of France, and was elected a member of the Academy of Science in 1816.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, the enquiry into the languages of the Empire overseen by the Coqueberts was essentially an attempt to localise linguistic diversity in geographical space. To this end, the Coqueberts carried out an extensive correspondence with various figures in the local administration from across the Empire, and the Office amassed a prodigious quantity of documentation penned by a slew of prefects, sub-prefects, clergy, teachers, lawyers and other provincial notables.<sup>75</sup> Linguistic maps, perhaps the earliest of their kind, reside in the archive alongside songs, poems and other samples of dialects, some in print, but mostly in manuscripts. Lengthy antiquarian disquisitions on the history of the respondent's commune are accompanied by vocabularies and grammatical treatises aimed at describing the local language.

While the urge to locate the linguistic diversity of the population in geographic space coloured the entire enquiry, it should be noted that an important shift in the object of study took place at the end of 1806, a shift that has lead commentators such as René Merle to claim that we are dealing not only with two Coqueberts, but with two enquiries.<sup>76</sup> Eugène himself understood the enquiry as taking place in two distinct phases. This much is clear from Eugène's draft report of 1812 as well as the draft versions of the letters sent out by the Office to its respondents in the provinces. Thus, in 1806, the elder Coquebert expressed his intentions to the Prefect of the *arrondissement* of Malmedy in the Belgian department of the Ourthe. According to Coquebert the departmental statistics published up to that point had not traced "with enough precision the boundaries of the French language despite its importance on a great number of accounts".<sup>77</sup> In his 1812 report, Eugène echoed his father, claiming that "we thought that the first step to take consisted in precisely determining the limits of the extent of the countries in which each



of the principal idioms, which can be considered as mother tongues, are spoken".<sup>78</sup> The 'mother tongues' identified by Eugène were French, German, Italian, Flemish, Breton and Basque. Once the geographic limits were defined, the population of speakers of each language was calculated from census data. The second stage was also concerned with linguistic geography, but moved beyond the notion of languages to that of dialects. According to Eugène, the aim was "to attempt in the same way to recognise the principle points which more or less circumscribe the territory occupied by each secondary dialect of these diverse principal languages".<sup>79</sup> This ambition saw the Coqueberts cleave the map of France into two great chunks, the *langue d'oc*- and *langue d'oïl*-speaking regions, a distinction that would recur throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, and then break these areas down further into smaller dialect zones.<sup>80</sup>

It would appear that the enquiry was initially conceived with administrative ends in mind, and the project had potential applications in the administration of the Empire. The Revolution witnessed the complete spatial reorganisation of the administrative structures of the French territory, from the irregular *pays d'élection* (areas administered by a royal intendant) and *pays d'état* (areas where representative bodies or estates regulated fiscal policy) of the *Ancien régime* to more uniform departments. Questions over the administrative organisation of the nation's territory reappeared as France's borders expanded, bringing non-francophone areas with no history of carrying out administration or justice in French under the purview of the French ministries. As a result, language increasingly became an issue in the demarcation and organisation of administrative and juridical structures. Under the Consulate Jean-Baptiste-Moïse Jollivet, the *Commissaire générale du gouvernement* for the territories annexed on the left bank of the Rhine, proposed the reduction of the number of departments in the annexed territories from four to three. As part of this reorganisation, he sought to detach the canton of Reifferscheid from the Sarre and attach it to the canton of Scheiden in the Ourthe. Although his principal justification was to maintain parity in the department's populations, the German-speaking nature of these two cantons made such a reorganisation more desirable. As Jollivet commented: "it is moreover to be observed that the communes which currently make up the Canton of Schleiden [...] speak the same language and have the same customs and habits as those from the Canton of Reifferscheid, to which we now have all the more reason to support our proposed unification".<sup>81</sup>

Discussions concerning the establishment of French rule over the territories that had been annexed during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars made the question of language a live one within the Ministry of the Interior. This much is clear from a letter sent by the Minister of Justice to the Minister of the Interior in June 1806, concerning the use of the French language in the occupied departments of northern Italy:

I have already posed some time ago to His Majesty the question which is the subject of your letter from the 2nd of this month, discussing the necessity of prolonging the delay for the use of the French language in the department composing the aforementioned Liguria. I will call again for the attention of the State Council to this subject.

It is intriguing that this letter should have found its way into the documentation produced by the enquiry. It does, however, make clear that the Coqueberts' initial efforts, in seeking to define the territory of the French language, were not unrelated to the concerns of a government attempting to organise and administer a multilingual Empire.

It is equally clear, however, that while the enquiry began as an administrative project, its final form, concerned above all with the dialects of the French Empire, owed more to the antiquarian interests of the Coqueberts themselves. The report drafted by Eugène in 1812 was essentially an unsuccessful plea to continue the enquiry following the dissolution of the *Bureau de la statistique*, which was closed largely due to its inability to respond promptly to government requests for information on material conditions.<sup>82</sup> When the translations gathered by the Coqueberts to describe the languages of the Empire were published after the fall of Napoleon, they appeared in the memoirs of the Society of Antiquarians.<sup>83</sup> The enquiry should thus be considered a composite work, carried out over a lengthy period of time and shaped both by the administrative and scholarly concerns of the Coqueberts.

### MAPPING LANGUAGE, DIALECT AND POPULATION

The Coqueberts' initial forays into the study of language took place in the summer of 1806. Their concern with the frontiers between French-speaking regions and those areas where German, Flemish, Basque and Catalan were spoken bear witness to the burgeoning multilingualism of

the French state ushered in by the military advances of the Revolution and Empire. In pursuit of these linguistic borders, the Coqueberts had two types of sources produced: a collection of linguistic maps, now held at the National Library,<sup>84</sup> and a number of nominative lists, composed for different *arrondissements* by the relevant sub-prefects. These lists, which are now spread between the National Library and the Rouen National Library, where the family papers were deposited by Eugène Coquebert de Montbret, gave the names of the *arrondissements*' communes, the language spoken therein, and sometimes the population of these communes.<sup>85</sup> The dates of the correspondence relating to this effort at linguistic geography show that the enquiry began sometime in the summer of 1806, with the responses arriving between late July and October of that year.

These data on the geographic spread of languages was used by the Coqueberts to calculate the populations of speakers of the various languages spoken in the Empire. These figures, which are given in Table 2.1, were presented in a report dated 1808, and then in the Coqueberts' 1831 publication on the subject.<sup>86</sup> In the 1808 report, Eugène Coquebert de Montbret outlined the method followed to arrive at these figures; first 'authentic' information was compiled on the limits of each language in those departments where languages other than French were in use. Then, the population of "all the communes in the departments with mixed languages speaking the same idiom" was counted, giving the number of speakers of languages other than French in the territories of the Empire.<sup>87</sup> This produced a more accurate result than Abbé Grégoire's frequently cited yet vague assertion that six million Frenchmen spoke no French, and only three million spoke it properly. Indeed, while frequently quoted uncritically as evidence of France's linguistic diversity, Grégoire's numbers should probably be treated as a rhetorical flourish rather than a statistical fact, for nothing in the papers he amassed on the subject hint at how he arrived at such figures.<sup>88</sup>

The Coqueberts' efforts represent the first serious attempt to quantify France's linguistic diversity. However, despite Eugène Coquebert's claims that the work he and his father had carried out should be considered as more than 'a simple hypothetical insight',<sup>89</sup> the outline of the method they used made clear that his own figures should be treated as little more than indicative. The Coqueberts were forced to assume that languages occupy homogenous territories, and that either side of a linguistic 'line of demarcation', the population was effectively monolingual. Yet as the correspondence relating to his effort makes clear, the

**Table 2.1** Population of the first French Empire by language

French	28,126,000 <sup>a</sup>
Italian	4,079,000
German	2,705,000
Flemish	2,277,000
Breton	967,000
Basque	108,000
Total	38,262,000

<sup>a</sup>In the 1831 publication of these figures, the population of speakers of French ‘in its different dialects and patois’ is given as 27,926,000. The rest of the figures remain the same giving a total population of 38,062,000. *Source* An F12 1566 Population de la France et langues parlées dans l’Empire; E. Coquebert de Montbret ‘Essai d’un travail sur la géographie de la langue française’

situation was not always this straightforward. For example, the sub-prefect of the arrondissement of Saint-Dié in the Vosges claimed that “of all the communes in the aforementioned province of Alsace included in the Department of Vosges, Malzéville [...] is the only one where German is more generally used than the French language”.<sup>90</sup> As for the other Alsatian communes in the sub-prefect’s arrondissement, “they understand German there but all the inhabitants speak only French, and it is only in Malzéville that the majority of inhabitants only speak the German language”.<sup>91</sup> The Coqueberts’ method offered no way of representing such degrees of bilingualism, with settlements such as Malzéville simply placed on one side or the other of the language boundary. The Coqueberts encountered similar problems in Brittany. In October 1806, the prefect of Morbihan wrote to Coquebert, who had expressed concerns over the accuracy of the linguistic border indicated by the prefect, explaining the reasoning behind his placement of the line. According to the prefect, the course of the river Vilaine marked, for the most part, the line separating French-speaking communes from Breton-speaking ones. However, “in the three communes of Pénestin, Camoël and Ferél, the French language is truly dominant, I have not included it in my line of demarcation, because they also speak Breton there, albeit less universally than in the country beyond this river”.<sup>92</sup> The prefect had therefore included these communes within the Breton-speaking area, “in order to not omit anywhere Breton is known”.<sup>93</sup> The Coqueberts recognised this difficulty: “I do not need to tell you”, the elder Coquebert wrote to the sub-prefect of Malmedy by way of instruction, “that I consider as

belonging to the German language any commune where this language is habitually spoken even if one concurrently uses the French language".<sup>94</sup> As this attempt to add greater precision to their efforts at mapping demonstrates, bilingualism continued to elude their representations of linguistic space.

The responses to the Coqueberts' enquiry indicate that bilingualism of various degrees was a common phenomenon along the zones of linguistic contact. The prefect of the Loire-Inférieure informed the Coqueberts that French was the language of his department, while "as for the Celtic language or *bas Breton*, it is only used as a means of communication with the inhabitants of the other departments of Brittany".<sup>95</sup> Similarly, in his letter concerning the Basque language, the prefect of the Basses-Pyrénées commented that "in lots of communes of the French language, a large number of inhabitants know Basque. It is a natural consequence of the relations they have with their neighbouring people and that is noticeable at all the borders".<sup>96</sup> A similar observation was made by the prefect of the Belgian department of Jemappes, who claimed that Flemish was in use only in the villages of Bever and Absennes, but that interactions with nearby Flemish speakers encouraged individuals to learn the language: "due to our necessary relations with the Flemish people, whose land we border, there have always been, in all the areas of this canton, and notably in our town, people who have made it their duty to learn their idiom".<sup>97</sup> As these comments imply, this kind of bilingualism seems to have been particularly the case amongst those sections of the population who were mobile, such as those involved in commerce. Thus, the prefect of the Loire-Inférieur, quoting the *departmental statistics* published in 1794, explained that in the environs of Guérande, a commune home to large salt marshes and situated in the north of the Loire-Inférieure on the border with the department of Morbihan about 60 kilometres from the market town of Vannes, there existed several villages "where one also speaks French and the Vannetais celtic". It was claimed that "the use of these two language is necessary for trade, for the business of exchange that they have with the departments beyond the Vilaine where they bring salt and from where they receive the grains they consume".<sup>98</sup>

Having described the limits of the French language in relation to its neighbours in just a few months, the Coqueberts moved rapidly onto an attempt to outline the distribution of dialects throughout the territory of the French Empire. This attempt led the Coqueberts to move beyond the classification of languages such as French, German, Italian, Dutch,

Flemish, Basque and Breton, breaking them down into smaller dialect zones. To this end, the Coqueberts collected numerous samples of the language in use across the Empire. To facilitate comparison they chose a uniform text, the parable of the prodigal son, to be translated into these ‘idioms for vulgar use’. This in itself was something of a departure, for while translations of biblical passages had long fulfilled the purpose of describing and comparing languages, it was invariably the Lord’s Prayer that was used. In the mid-sixteenth century, Conrad Gessner collected 130 versions of the paternoster in various languages, and the same piece was used to describe the languages of the indigenous peoples of North America in works like Champlain’s *Voyages dans la nouvelle France*.<sup>99</sup> The Coqueberts were well aware of this tradition, but felt the Lord’s Prayer too short and too abstract to form the basis of a comparative project. The parable of the prodigal son was longer and had “the merit of containing only simple ideas that were familiar to everyone”.<sup>100</sup> The Coqueberts requested the first of these translations in September 1806 from the department of the Haut Rhin. It was only at this moment that the parable was chosen, for the letter contains a crossed-out passage, which read: “as for the choice of passages ... to be translated into these diverse idioms, I depend entirely on you”, replaced by the demand for a translation of the parable.<sup>101</sup> According to Eugène’s 1812 report, the Coqueberts collected more than 350 versions of the parable from 74 departments, each one representing a different dialect, idiom or patois.<sup>102</sup> They also received a diverse collection of songs, fragments of plays, grammatical essays and dictionaries of local dialect. Linguists have subsequently used these documents to illustrate descriptions of language change in these dialects.<sup>103</sup>

For the Coqueberts, the interest of this material was its potential to inform a more complete linguistic geography of the French Empire. The Coqueberts understood linguistic diversity as a foundational characteristic of the population, a feature of the arcane folk culture of the peasant unaffected by education, economic change or technical innovation. As Eugène wrote of the linguistic separation between the *langue d’oil* speaking North and Occitan-speaking South of the country:

This distinction was eradicated long ago in relation to politics, and to that of legislation (because the provinces of the South followed Roman law to the exclusion of that of the North, where diverse local customs were alone

in force) but it still subsists in relation to language, to the mode of farming and the manner in which buildings are constructed.<sup>104</sup>

The Coqueberts considered linguistic difference a product of the long history of the peopling of western Europe, constituting a series of distinctions over which the French state had been constructed. Such distinctions were more durable than political and administrative divisions, a point they reiterated in their 1831 essay on linguistic geography: “One recognises that after the physical divisions, which are only natural and the most important of all, none should be prioritised over another as a result of the similarities and dissimilarities between idioms”.<sup>105</sup> From this perspective, the geographies of language sought by the Coqueberts were of far greater significance than political or administrative boundaries:

Less stable, undoubtedly, than the physical divisions, they are much more than political and administrative divisions. Centuries are hardly sufficient to change the language of a country, on the contrary all one needs is a war, a treaty of peace, exchange or sales, to give a province to new masters. However in ceasing to be fellow citizens, have they stopped being compatriots with those men whose language united them in permanent bonds?

For the Coqueberts, therefore, language was a foundational characteristic of the individual, and linguistic minorities, implanted on their territories and bound together by the ties of a shared language and history, a fundamental feature of the geography of Europe.

The Coqueberts’ view of language as a definitional feature of population raises the issue of whether they should be understood as proponents of an ‘ethnic’ view of linguistic identity. Language was central to the thought of nineteenth century ethno-nationalists. Giuseppe Mazzini, for example, would have recognised the basic features of the European national struggle in the Coqueberts’ formulation. As he wrote in an 1847 essay directed towards a liberal British audience, against the backdrop of the rising political and social tensions that would eventually result in the 1848 revolutions:

Several races are struggling: millions of men placed by God’s hand within fixed territorial boundaries, having a language of their own, as well as specific manners, tendencies, traditions and national songs. They are leashed and governed by other men whose manners, tendencies, and language are altogether foreign to them.<sup>106</sup>

If we set aside Mazzini's religious language, which had no counterpart in the secular formulations of geographic and antiquarian discovery employed by the Coqueberts, some parallels in the description of linguistic difference as one part of a foundational distinction between the character and manners of individuals composing the different nations of Europe do appear. Yet while the Coqueberts were pessimistic about the ability of government to change linguistic practice, they did not see language as totally immutable. Moreover, there is no sense that the Coqueberts viewed language as a legitimate basis for national self-determination.

At the same time, the Coqueberts did not appear to subscribe to the kind of civic definition of community expressed by some French commentators faced with the extreme ethno-linguistic diversity that characterised the population of France. This was a view expressed by Merlin de Douai during the Revolution, with his frequently quoted claim that Alsace should be considered part of France not because of the treaty of Münster, but because the Alsatian people had chosen to become French, language and all.<sup>107</sup> The Coqueberts, by contrast, sought to distinguish between linguistic communities, and the typology of linguistic groupings they produced was based on their understandings of the linguistic affinities between named varieties.

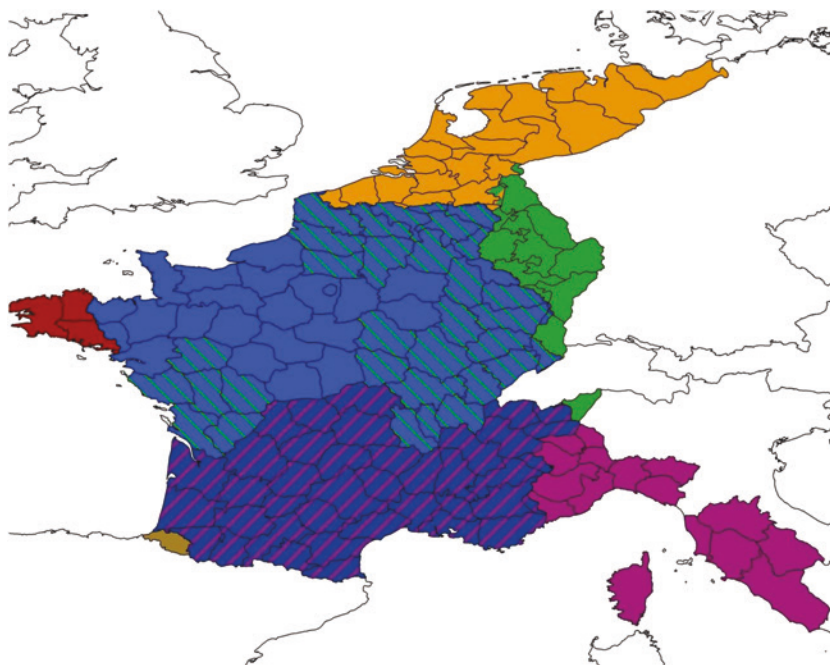
The Coqueberts produced two versions of this typology: Eugène's report to the Minister of the Interior in 1812; and the 1831 essay on the limits of the French language, largely conforming to a draft document in Charles-Étienne's hand.<sup>108</sup> According to Eugène's report, all of the dialects of the Empire were derived from four main language groupings, those derived from Latin, those derived from German, Breton and Basque.<sup>109</sup> These groupings were then broken down further into subsets of languages and their dialects. The languages deriving from Latin were grouped by Eugène under the headings of 'correctly spoken French,' the 'idioms of the Midi, Italian and Gascon'. With this last language, a divergence emerged between the writings of Eugène and Charles-Étienne: while the former designated Gascon as a language in its own right, the latter placed it alongside the other dialects of the 'idioms of the Midi or *langue d'oc*'.<sup>110</sup> More generally, Charles-Étienne organised his scheme around the distinction between the *langue d'oïl*, or as Eugène termed it, 'correctly spoken French and the *langue d'oc*, while Eugène, writing before the fall of Napoleon, also concerned himself with the








dialects of Italian and German. Finally, and almost as an afterthought, the Coqueberts touched on two languages spoken by members of diasporas resident in France—the Jewish ‘German dialect corrupted by Hebrew words’ presumably referring to Yiddish spoken by the Ashkenazi Jewish community in Alsace, and the language of the ‘Bohîmans’ spoken by Roma communities in Roussillon, Alsace and Lorraine.<sup>111</sup> Here, their attention was far more superficial, and omitted entirely from consideration the Arab populations in Paris and Marseille. For these groups, language became a central buttress of community cohesion, differentiating them from wider French society and reinforcing shared bonds. The community in Marseille, formed from a group of Egyptian refugees who arrived in the city in 1801, was even granted a chair in Arabic at the Lycée in Marseille in 1807.<sup>112</sup> This omission makes clear that the Coqueberts were above all interested in those groups who possessed a well-defined linguistic territory. These speakers were really only the largest minority within a polyglot empire. As is evident from Fig. 2.2, a map compiled from the Coqueberts’ observations, they were surrounded by speakers of the northern *langue d’oil* dialects, with the territory of the *langue d’oc* to the south, Breton to the west, Flemish, Dutch and German to the east, Italian to the southeast and a pocket of Basque speakers to the southwest.

For the Coqueberts, language was a feature of population and territory that could be mapped. This ‘territorialisation’ of language is familiar to scholars of nineteenth century nationalism. Here, language was used to justify nationalist claims to particular regions: if the population of a territory spoke a nation’s language, then that language must necessarily form part of a nation-state.<sup>113</sup> Later in the century, this understanding of language as a fundamental aspect of culture led the Coqueberts to a pessimistic outlook on the capacity of the state to change the language of the people. Reflecting on the failure of Joseph II to foist German upon the Magyar population of his Empire, and on the linguistic conflicts erupting over the use of Dutch and French in Belgium, the Coqueberts expressed doubt that measures undertaken by the government would succeed in effecting linguistic change<sup>114</sup>:

You must not believe that the destruction of patois is as near as they imagine. We can only hope for it with the march of time, the progress in primary education, and the slow but assured empire of imitation. It is in vain that we hope to acceleration this revolution by administrative measures.<sup>115</sup>



**Languages:**

	Basque		French (Oïl)
	Breton		German
	Flemish/Dutch		German/Flemish/Dutch (no data)
	French		Italian
	French (Oc)		

**Fig. 2.2** Linguistic Geography of the Napoleonic Empire. *Source* Bnf Naf 5913 (Patois de la France IV- délimitations de la langue française), BmR Ms Mbt 191 (Recueil de linguistique)

For many of the politicians of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period, however, this perspective was somewhat alien. As the statistical descriptions of the period show, it was often held that culture could, and indeed should, be bent to the state's political will, rather than

the other way around. The expansion of France's borders under the Directory, made the example of the Roman Empire a portentous one for many Parisian deputies. The diversity of cultures and worldviews had made it impossible to govern Rome as a Republic and ushered in an era of the Empire, it was argued, and the plurality of citizens now within the French sphere of influence could do the same for the French Republic.<sup>116</sup> Under Napoleon, French politics took on an unapologetically imperial character, and the solution to cultural diversity and backwardness was often seen as unification at the hands of the state.<sup>117</sup> Yet amongst those administrators charged by Parisian governments, the reticence expressed by the Coqueberts was more common. These men, who provided the Coqueberts with their information, were also those charged with the practical implementation of Napoleonic policy, and it is to their views on language that we now turn.

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