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► **To cite this version:**

James Costa. A Materialist Take on Minoritization, Emancipation and Language Revitalization: Occitan Sociolinguistics since the 1970s. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, In press, 10.1111/josl.12618 . halshs-03970663

HAL Id: halshs-03970663

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03970663>

Submitted on 5 Apr 2023

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A materialist take on minoritization, emancipation, and language revitalization: Occitan sociolinguistics since the 1970s

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Abstract

This paper introduces and discusses Occitan sociolinguistics as it evolved from the 1970s onward as a theory of language contact as conflict. It was developed in conjunction with its Catalan counterpart and as a reaction to Joshua Fishman's allocational model of diglossia, and came as a response to conditions of swift social and linguistic change in Southern France after the Second World War. This model, proposed mainly at first by Robert Lafont in Montpelhièr, is strongly materialist in that it focuses on the material conditions of language production and replaces the language movement among other social struggles. This paper first explores the roots of the contemporary Occitan movement and its links with the birth of Occitan sociolinguistics. It then analyzes key concepts in Occitan sociolinguistics such as diglossic ideology as essential to understand processes of minoritization, linguistic alienation, and social domination. Finally, it looks at how this approach conceptualizes language revitalization not as a linguistic issue but as a social one and suggests that Occitan sociolinguistics provides an alternative to models of language loss and revival rooted in cultural and identity politics.

KEYWORDS

alienation, diglossia, emancipation, materialism, Occitan sociolinguistics, revitalization, Robert Lafont

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Abstract in Occitan

Aquest article presenta e discutís la sociolingüística occitana tala coma fuguèt concebuda despuei leis annadas 1970 coma teoria dau contact lingüistic coma conflict. Se desvelopèt cotria amb la sociolingüística catalana coma una reaccion au modèl alocacional de Joshua Fishman e venguèt coma una respònsa occitanista ai condicions socialas dei cambiaments sociaus e lingüistics rapids en Occitània après la fin de la seconda guerra mondiala. Aqueu modèl, prepausat mai que mai a l'origina per Robèrt Lafont a Montpelhier, is profundament materialist en çò que se concentra sus lei condicions materialas dei produccions lengatgieras e plaça lo moviment lingüistic entre leis autrei mobilizacions socialas. Aquest article ramenta primièr lei rasigas dau moviment occitan actuau e sei liames amb la naissença de la sociolingüística occitana. Passa puei a l'analisi de concèpts claus coma aqueu d'ideologia diglossica coma una part centrala de la comprensió dei procès de minorizacion, d'alienacion lingüistica e de dominacion sociala. Acaba amb la question de la revitalizacion de la lenga non coma question lingüistica mai coma problèma sociau, e suggesís que la sociolingüística occitana porgís d'alternativas ai modèls analitics e explicatius basats sus la cultura e l'identitat.

1 | INTRODUCTION: CONTACT AND CONFLICT

Occitan sociolinguistics both precedes Joshua Fishman's work on language contact and developed as a response to Fishman's lack of explicit conceptualization of conflict in his analysis of diglossia. It developed in Montpelhièr (in the south of France) in the 1960s and 1970s in close conversation with its counterpart School in Valencia and Catalonia (see Pujolar, 2021), both as a response to a historical situation—the rapid decline of Occitan in the South of France after the First World War—and as a political analysis of language substitution. This approach to sociolinguistics thus predates works on language death and language endangerment and presents a radically different take on language change and substitution, one rooted in materialist sociology. This article focuses on the sociolinguistic analyses initiated by Robert Lafont (1923–2009) from the 1950s onward, and developed by Felip Gardy (1948–), Henri Boyer (1946–), but also by Brigitte Schlieben-Lange (1943–2002) in Germany, or Georg Kremnitz (1945–) in Austria.

Occitan sociolinguistics, like the works of Lluís Aracil and Rafael Ninyoles analyzed by Joan Pujolar (2021) in this journal, is little known outside the Occitan, French, and Catalan spheres of readership. It is part of a wider movement of “peripheral sociolinguistics”—a term coined at a conference held

in Frankfurt in 1979 (Lafont, 1997, p. 33), perhaps by Brigitte Schlieben-Lange (Pujolar, 2021)—or “conflict sociolinguistics” (Kremnitz, 1979) that sought to problematize issues of language and society from the margins of European society and to contribute to the decolonization of societies that were understood as alienated by a form of colonial domination (Larzac, 1980).

Occitan (or *Lenga d'òc*) is described by linguists as a Romance language traditionally spoken in what is now southern France (including in Provence, Languedoc, and Gascony). It was one of the first written languages of Medieval Europe used for both administrative usage and literature (that of troubadours in particular). Occitan usage was gradually marginalized in public life after the Kingdom of France was politically consolidated in the sixteenth century around a unique center in Paris. Consequently, various linguistic assemblages involving Occitan, French, and Latin were formed at different levels (local, provincial, regional, etc.) in subsequent centuries in literature, the arts, politics, and everyday practices. Occitan remained, nevertheless, the language of the vast majority of people in the Occitan south well into the twentieth century. Unlike Catalan society, however, Occitania was not subjected to Francoist rule (1936–1975). Thus Occitan society, while disempowered from an economic perspective in France after the Second World War (Lafont, 1998), did not suffer direct physical oppression. What was at stake was mostly symbolic violence on the part of the Parisian center (Lafont, 2004), reproducing historical forms of absolutism (Lagarde, 2016). The Occitan language movement did, however, gain considerable traction in the 1970s, following the convergence of several social and economic struggles among various sectors of society in an international context of worldwide decolonization and civil rights movements.

In this paper, I wish to outline the development and main contributions of Occitan sociolinguistics to issues of language in society, before showing how the Occitan model constitutes a radically different take on reversing language shift compared with Fishman's. The main train of thought I will be following is that of Robèrt Lafont, a polymath and prolific novelist, sociologist, historian, as well as a linguist and a sociolinguist (Puig i Moreno, 2011). As a sociolinguist, he founded a sociolinguistic School that sought to understand and resolve linguistic conflict in southern France and praxematics, a linguistic theory that analyzed language as a social praxis (Barbèris et al., 2003). This approach meant to develop a linguistics of *parole* rather than *langue*¹—a linguistics rooted in social practice and in materialist approaches to language. While each current is still productive today, and while both research strands can be connected in several ways (Lafont, 1978), in this paper, I focus only on the sociolinguistic and language policy aspects of his work.

2 | SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE ACTIVISM IN THE 1960S AND 1970S

In this section, I review early signs of linguistic revival in southern France. I show that one central element of the failure of the original Occitan language movement, the Felibrige (created in 1854) was its lack of commitment to the political reality of its time. Conversely, the (relative) success of the second Occitan movement in the 1960s and 1970s, from which the Occitan sociolinguistics I discuss in this paper was born, lies in its deep engagement with the material conditions that resulted from post-Second World War political and economic decisions.

There were early signs of renewed interest in the various Occitan dialects from the 1780s onward (Merle, 2010). It was, however, in the 1850s that the Occitan language mobilized by a classical, post-1848 Romantic-type, mainly literary movement (the Felibrige) under the aegis of the poet Frederic² Mistral. This organization still endures 170 years later. For the best part of the last century, nonetheless, it has been a literary organization, cultivating and celebrating Provence's literature and traditions.

While Mistral did obtain the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1904, his movement achieved little in political terms and failed to secure any language rights—aside perhaps from children in Provence (but not in the rest of Occitania) ceasing to be beaten for speaking Occitan at school.

An organization born after Louis Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état in 1852, the Felibrige hesitated between Empire and Republic, conservatism and progressivism throughout the nineteenth century (Martel, 1986). The year 1907 was, or could have been, an important turning point in the junction between social struggles and the language movement. That year, wine producers in Languedoc staged some of the largest protests in France since the revolution in the 1790s: "As wine prices remained depressed, protesters filled the streets of the region's cities, culminating in the gathering of an estimated 600,000 people in Montpellier on 9 June 1907" (Smith & Hawkey, 2015, p. 308). Summoned by protesters, Mistral refused to back the protests, perhaps squandering the only chance language advocates in Southern France ever had to form a large, national platform and to shift the political dynamic in their favor (Lafont, 1991, p. 54).

It was a similar foundational moment of social struggle that enabled the second Occitan movement in the 1960s to emerge under the combined auspices of literature (again), sociology, and sociolinguistics. This movement was a consequence of a complex evolution of the Occitan movement itself: its center of gravity had moved from the Catholic south-east of Provence around Avignon and Arle to a more left-leaning Languedoc, a shift initiated at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Languedoc, it acquired a more radical and left-wing tone (Abrate, 2001). A fresh start to the work of standardization was also implemented starting in 1905 by philologists such as Prospèr Estieu (1860–1939) and Antonin Perbòsc (1861–1944). They were joined later by Loís Alibèrt (1884–1959), and together they proposed a new spelling system for Occitan based on the administrative *scripta* that had been used in various parts of the Occitan territory in the Middle Ages (Martel, 2012).

It was this movement which, after the war and under the guidance of Robèrt Lafont, sought to take into account the political economic transformations of the Occitan-speaking areas following the industrialization of agriculture and the creation of a Common European Market in the 1950s.

While this might seem arcane, it is essential to recount briefly some biographical elements which, from exile to wartime experiences, would shape the language movement. Lafont was born in 1923 in Nimes, but in 1936 he experienced what he later called *còntranaiassènça* (counterbirth) when his parents moved to a small town in the Jura, in the north-east of France (Lafont, 1979). It was this exile which, as he recounted in his 1979 autobiography, made him aware of linguistic difference, and of the language that his grandparents spoke among themselves. Upon returning to live with his grandparents in 1938, he became close to the local Felibres. The Felibrige, Lafont wrote, was both too imbued with a mythical approach to a world that had largely disappeared and too compromised with the far right and Nazi occupation (it counted among its members Charles Maurras, famous far-right writer, organizer of the monarchist and Catholic group *Action Française* and wartime collaborationist). Lafont soon left the Felibrige, and after the war he had also abandoned what he called his Occitan nationalism (Lafont, 1979, p. 23).

In a text initially published in 1989 and reflecting on 30 years of sociolinguistic practices, Robèrt Lafont referred to a study he had proposed in 1952 to the members of the then recently created Institut d'Estudis Occitans (IEO, Institute of Occitan Studies) (Lafont, 1952). This early paper argued for the need of a basic survey to roughly evaluate how many speakers of Occitan were left and to explore contemporary discourse on language issues. At that time, situations would have been strongly dissimilar across regions: while in some areas Occitan was still being passed on to children, in other parts (in Provence and Dauphiné for example) the systematic socialization of children in Occitan had stopped after the First World War (Bert et al., 2009). The 1952 proposal also aimed to understand the causes

(ideological, social, and historical) of language shift among Occitan speakers and to get an idea of actual linguistic practices.

The IEO board rejected Lafont's proposal, thus delaying, he claimed, the birth of Occitan sociolinguistics by 20 years (Lafont, 1989). The 1952 text already focused on what Lafont termed "*conflit des langages*" (conflict of languages). Occitan sociolinguistics, unlike Weinreich's approach that was published in the 1950s also, was from its onset "the scientific outcome of an activist stance,"³ a stance born out of implication in the field.

It was, however, another event that resulted in the sociolinguistics which Lafont later developed, one rooted in political economic changes and one which, unlike what had happened in 1907, Occitan activists did not eschew (Lagarde, 2012). The early 1960s had already been marked by the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community established in 1951, which consecrated an industrial shift in France towards its north and east (Lafont, 1998). On December 19, 1961, a long 66-day strike was called by the workers of the coalfield in La Sala (Decazeville in French), in the central Occitan region of Roergue (the current Avairon department). The discovery of oil fields in the Middle East, Africa and America had rendered oil much more competitive than coal, and France announced it would gradually decrease its use of coal (Contreras Romero, 2006). The mine at La Sala was to be converted to a chemical plant (Roqueta et al., 1975). When natural gas was brought to La Sala, this resulted in the reorganization of the site and several workers were sent to other positions far from home. The lack of will to negotiate on the part of the French government led to demonstrations and later to a strike, in which workers demanded that the plans for the mines be reconsidered, and the mines kept open. The employees also asked that all workers be returned to the site, and demanded retirement packages aligned with prereorganization arrangements.

The coal miners' strike in La Sala was politicized in several ways, nationally but also regionally (Contreras Romero, 2006). Most importantly perhaps it was its regional dimension, in which some politicians equated the struggle with one in favor of defending the region against central authorities, and the lack of solutions proposed by the communist party that opened the way to the Occitan formulation of a response. A later poem by the Occitan novelist Joan Bodon, written in 1980, captures this moment:

<i>Los carbonièrs de La Sala</i>	The miners of La Sala
<i>Occitans sens o saber</i>	Occitan without being aware
<i>Cantan l'Internacionala</i>	Sing the Internationale
<i>La cançon del nòstre esper.</i>	The song of our hope.

The events at La Sala are too complex to be told in detail here.⁴ They were decisive in forging an intellectual response to events that marked the onset of radical transformations of the country under the impulse of the newly created European Coal and Steel Community (the future European Union). They were also crucial in that they gave French journalist Serge Mallet an opportunity to coin the concept of "colonized from within" (*colonisés de l'intérieur*) (France Observateur, January 11, 1962, in Roqueta et al., 1975), which Lafont later theorized as "Interior colonialism" (see Lagarde, 2012 for a full analysis). The important point for our story here is that the struggle at La Sala was conducted at least in part in Occitan, the everyday language of the workers—they were local but also immigrants from Spain, Italy, Poland, and had largely become socialized into the (by now multilingual) community through that language. A famous photo shows a poster saying, in Occitan but using French orthographic conventions: "Bibo la Souldaritat. Nous daïssaren pas torssé" (Long live solidarity, we shall not be defeated) (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1 Miners' demonstration in La Sala, 1962. Photo Centre Presse Aveyron.

For some members of Institut d'Estudis Occitans, this was a waking call. It came after a decade of debates about the necessity to move away from cultural productions and to produce sociopolitical analyses grounded in social reality for political struggle. Robert Lafont founded the *Comité occitan d'étude et d'action* (COEA, Occitan Committee for Study and Action) in Narbonne in 1962 as a direct consequence of the events in La Sala. It was a political club, created to foster dialogue with political parties; a club founded on sociological, political and sociolinguistic works which analyzed contemporary society in Southern France in terms of decolonization (Cavaillé, 2017), in the sense that it shared numerous characteristics with French colonies overseas: a peripheralized tract of land, used primarily by the center for its natural resources and its workforce. While, of course, the racial factor was not the central issue it was in other parts of the world, stereotyping was nevertheless an important part of the hetero-identification of Southerners by Northerners (see Boyer, 2019).

In the first issue of *Viure*, the COEA journal founded in 1965, Lafont proposed a full analysis of what he called Occitan alienation, basically another term for (de)colonization: the capacity for a group to develop freely without external constraint (Lafont, 1965). His conceptualization of groupness is rooted in dialectical materialism—far from resorting to any type of essentialization he defined the group as emerging from oppositions and tensions that language was an integral part of:

Lo sentiment de la lenga viu dins e per un ensems d'oposicions dialecticas, que las fan nàisser las relacions d'una societat en genèsi : aital l'occitan del sègle XII se destria del latin literari coma una lenga laïca e localizada per oposicion a una lenga de glèisa e ecumenica [...]. (Lafont, 1965 non paginated online version)

The sentiment of language lives in and through a series of dialectical oppositions, born of the relations of a nascent society: thus Occitan in the 12th c. was separated from

literary Latin as a secular and localized language as opposed to a religious and ecumenical language [...].⁵

Lafont's analysis was as much a critique of society in a Marxian sense as a critique of the language movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He considered that early revival movements emerged from within alienated society and in many ways perpetuated alienation. He viewed Occitan literature, in particular, as disconnected from social reality and consequently suffered from and reproduced popular alienation.

This analysis was not, however, culturalist, ethnicist, or even nationalist, unlike other sectors of the Occitan movement (Rouquette et al., 1982). What, he argued, those unfamiliar with the French context failed to understand was that the national vs. regional dichotomy stood for a social class dialectic (Lafont, 1965). There was, in this perspective, an Occitan people but its existence had been thwarted by colonization and economic domination. What founded the people was the Occitan language. In this approach, the Occitan bourgeoisie, alienated by the French national ideology and excluded to a certain extent from the mechanisms of power in France until the nineteenth century, gradually took control of parts of the (French) state apparatus by investing in the Empire after the 1850s and acquiring positions as civil servants. In many cases, cultural repression in the south of France was decided and implemented by Occitans who turned against the people, in the very name of the people (Lafont, 1965).

This long detour via the constitution of the Occitan movement helps explain the fundamental difference between Occitan sociolinguistics and later disciplinary developments: mainly, its primary focus was not language. It stems from the necessity to emancipate (a) people and to free a territory. As Lafont put it, "*la lenga en se mòr pas mai que non es. Mòr lo país*" (the language itself does not die, since it is not [it has no existence]). What dies is the country/land (Lafont, 1979, p. 47). This materialized in the anti-military movement on the Causse de Larzac after 1971. After 1974, it took the form of anti-capitalist protests subsumed under the *Volèm viure al país* (We want to live in our homeland) slogan and organization led by Robèrt Lafont, among others. In the 1970s the COEA had developed a dialogue with the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail; General Confederation of Labour) trade union. It had also expanded the slogan developed in the 1970s (*Volèm viure al país*; We want to live at home) to *Viure, trabalhar e decidir al país* (Living, working, and deciding at home). *Volèm viure al país* became a political movement in 1974, gaining support from the then-strong French communist party in the late 1970s (Alliès, 2019).

This movement was rendered moot after the beginning of the 1980s for numerous reasons, especially the small steps towards regionalization in France after 1981 (Martel, 1989), a year that saw the election of François Mitterrand as the first socialist President of France. This process was also caused by the marginalization of the entire French productive apparatus within the European Community after 1983, the dismantling of steel and other large industries as a consequence of European policies (Lafont, 1991), and the adoption by socialist governments after 1983 of a neoliberal agenda. In the next section, I look at the practical implications of this political outlook on language.

3 | LANGUAGE LOSS: DIGLOSSIA AS IDEOLOGY

As Lafont (1989) put it, Occitan sociolinguistics could have emerged in the 1950s had the Occitan linguistic movement Institut d'Estudis Occitans accepted his proposition to conduct a serious survey of language use. Yet, it was not before 1969 that American sociolinguistics (in its Fishmanian form) reached Occitan researchers based in Montpellier (Boyer, 1991, pp. 16–17), mediated by Catalan sociolinguists. Lluís Aracil had indeed started a critical conversation with the concepts developed

by Fishman as early as 1966. As Joan Pujolar recalls, “Lafont participated regularly from 1968 to 1972 in the *Universitat Catalana d’Estiu* [Catalan Summer University], an interdisciplinary forum of Catalan intellectuals and activists (including Fuster and Aracil) situated in French Catalonia” (Pujolar, 2021, p. 135). Together, they developed a theory of diglossia as conflict.

3.1 | Contact versus conflict

The main bone of contention between Fishman and Catalan/Occitan sociolinguistics concerned the status of diglossia, and what political consequences this entailed. Fishman defined diglossia as the functional distribution of different languages in a community, a model whereby different languages could coexist while being used in different spheres. Typically, for minoritized languages, this could entail that they would be used in the home and not in the public sphere. Most importantly, this model of contact implied the possibility of stability over time. Catalan sociolinguists, on the other hand, insisted from the onset that such a situation in which two languages coexisted at societal level could only be unstable and temporary. Lafont stressed that “the theory of functions in Ferguson and Fishman’s work conceals the really existing conflict in society” (Lafont, 1984b, p. 7). Contact, thus, cannot exist without conflict, and there could only be two outcomes to conflict: normalization or substitution. The full reestablishment of the dominated language to all usages and domains of social life, or gradual demise and replacement.

3.2 | Occitan specificities: patois as ideology

Connections, debates, and exchanges were constant between Occitan and Catalan/Valencian sociolinguists throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Henri Boyer, lectured at the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* from 1973 and 1980 before becoming a professor of sociolinguistics at the University of Montpellier in Occitania. He was thus ideally placed to propose a synthesis of both currents in a book entitled *Langues en conflit: études sociolinguistiques* (1990). Compared with Catalan sociolinguistics, the Occitan School seemingly placed a greater focus on the individual subject.⁶ But because of sociopolitical and sociolinguistic differences on the ground, the Occitan model did differ from the Catalan model on a few theoretical points. Indeed, while Catalan was still spoken by the bourgeoisie in Barcelona and had been an essential aspect of anti-Francoist resistance, “Occitan sociolinguistics, faced with shreds of language and which was born after the disaster of the collapse of intergenerational transmission, and uses among those born after 1945, [could not] pretend to be unaware of this phenomenon” (Lagarde, 2016). In many ways, the situation in Valencia was closer to that of Occitania; local elites there had switched to Spanish during the course of the twentieth century.

Occitan sociolinguistics could not so much focus on how policies promoting public bilingualism were in reality an ideologically motivated type of policy ultimately aiming for monolingualism in the dominant language (Aracil, 1982). Unlike Catalan in the Spanish state, Occitan (and Catalan in France) had undergone what Lafont (1977) called a long process of *patoisització*, or “becoming a patois.” While linguistic discrimination is likely widespread in many (if not all) societies, it had become a defining characteristic of social relations in France between the capital and the provinces after the seventeenth century. The term patois came to index speech that “had no grammar, could not express everything, are bastardized forms of French and other languages” (Lafont, 1977, p. 132)—in the Occitan case of French, Italian and Spanish.

Consequently, historical studies were central to Occitan sociolinguistics to understand the fabric of diglossia as an historical process of class and territorial domination that developed over several centuries. Becoming a patois entailed first renouncing the Occitan spelling conventions in administrative usage in favor of French spelling conventions (see Lodge, 1993, p. 123 for a cartographic representation of script displacement) after the various acts of union and annexation of Occitan territories with or by France after the fifteenth century. The second step, after the sixteenth century, consisted in social depreciation. It involved the suppression of the very possibility of an autonomous cultural life in provincial societies or among subordinate classes: “The term patois thus sanctions this step, extending upon the entire social body [...] the linguistic-cultural ideology of national unity and the dominance of formal culture” (Lafont, 1977, p. 133).

The patois situation, according to Occitan sociolinguists, involved three stages/characteristics: the loss of intercommunication outside the microlocal; the loss of minoritized language use among the dominant classes; the loss of minoritized language use among the rest of the population. French linguists, Lafont said, reduced the question to a geolinguistic/dialectological one (the first characteristic), erasing two of the three fundamental dimensions of patois. They thus used the term “patois” in an uncontrolled manner to describe microlocal forms of language under the pretence of supposedly neutral description. What guided traditional, presociolinguistic, dialectological work, was thus ideology.

Ideology, as understood by sociolinguists, was fairly different from what is now known as “language ideologies” in contemporary linguistic ideology. One struggles to find an actual definition of ideology in Occitan sociolinguistics; the term was so widespread in French research in the 1970s in particular that defining it was likely thought superfluous. At the core of ideology was false consciousness and power relations, rather than language change (as was the concern in Michael Silverstein’s [1979] article⁷). Occitan sociolinguists mainly discussed one type of ideology, which they called “diglossic ideology”: they sought to uncover ideological mechanisms that serve to mask conflict under a veil of peaceful coexistence, complementary functional allocation of linguistic domains, and necessary change. Conflict itself is not necessarily frontal—in fact it is perhaps rarely so:

Cependant s’il y a réellement conflit, et ce à chaque instant de la parole, le conflit n’est jamais, ou pratiquement jamais exprimé en tant que tel. Il est toujours dévié, disséminé, évacué. (Gardy & Lafont, 1981, p. 74)

However, if there really is a conflict, in every utterance, the conflict is never, or practically never, expressed as such. It is always diverted, disseminated, evacuated.

3.3 | Diglossia uncovered

The aim of sociolinguistics, according to Lafont, was then clear: to uncover diglossic mechanisms, so as to reverse them and to defuse the conflict that lies at its root. More generally, Occitan sociolinguistics set itself the task to study diglossic ideologies around the world (Lafont, 1977, pp. 132–33) and to promote such research wherever possible. This agenda materialized with the creation of *Lengas*, the sociolinguistics journal created by Occitan sociolinguists in Montpellier in 1977.⁸

Because it equated diglossia with conflict, Occitan sociolinguistics took the view that it was impossible to take a neutral stance. For Lafont (1984), *implication* is the form that activism takes while doing science. More specifically,

[L]e sociolinguiste occitan se trouve dans la nécessité, s'il ne veut pas adhérer plus ou moins implicitement au schéma d'évolution linguistique qu'il analyse, c'est-à-dire donner à la dominance et à l'intégration culturelle des armes et des moyens en renfort, d'affirmer son implication dénonciatrice dans le processus. [...] Mais sa démarche demeure scientifique, c'est-à-dire objectivante doublement: elle construit et déconstruit l'objectivité de l'objet, elle objective en même temps le sociolinguiste comme tel. [...] Il apparaît donc à la fois comme impliqué et désimpliqué: aux yeux de la dominance, comme un militant à ce titre suspecté, aux yeux de la militance comme un désengagé suspect ou de tiédeur ou de trahison. (Lafont, 1997, pp. 94–95)

Occitan sociolinguists find themselves in need to affirm their denunciatory involvement in the process, if they do not want to adhere more or less implicitly to the pattern of linguistic evolution they are analysing – that is to say, to give dominance and integration cultural arms and means of reinforcement. [...] But this approach remains scientific, that is to say doubly objectifying: it constructs and deconstructs the objectivity of the object, it objectifies the sociolinguist as such at the same time. [...] [Occitan sociolinguists] therefore appear both involved and dis-involved: in the eyes of the dominance, as suspiciously militant in this capacity; in the eyes of the militancy as a disengaged individual suspect of lukewarmness or betrayal.

In her recent book on activism among academics involved in language revitalization, sociolinguist Haley De Korne discusses several strategies that scholars can deploy. She cites “creating” (resources, events), “representing” (practices, identities), and “connecting” (people, resources) (De Korne, 2021, p. 83). To this list, Occitan scholarship would add “uncovering” (or “exposing”). Diglossia, in this perspective, masks existing conflicts. Part of scholarly work is to reveal how conflict is masked by discourses of complementarity among languages or registers.

Across time, Lafont and others increasingly came to speak of diglossic mechanisms (*fonctionnements diglossiques*) rather than diglossia to better characterize social conflict as it unfolds in everyday interactions as well as in staged events (in literature, in theater plays, etc.). One aim was also to break free from the rigid framework of diglossia that pitted (generally) two languages in a face-to-face opposition. Diglossic mechanisms in Occitania thus involved not two languages but, at least, the interplay between the following linguistic varieties or registers (Lafont, 1984):

- a. An inherited form of Occitan (the raw material of dialectologist, then almost completely gone).
- b. Reconstituted Occitan, based on the language proposed by the Occitan revival movements after 1854. While clearly identifiable, it is difficult to pin down. It is a constantly shifting, idiosyncratic, arrangement of normative and inherited elements, depending on individual social and geographic trajectories. (Lafont, 1997, p. 98)
- c. Official French: the French of official institutions, including education.
- d. Official southern French: official French with Occitan phonology, often referred to as “French with a southern accent.”
- e. Imported colloquial French: the oralized version of official French as spoken in the Paris area.
- f. Imported French slang: northern French slang, present in written and oral forms through novels and the cinema.

- g. Francitan: probably most observable usages (in 1984). An “interlanguage,” or contact variety combining phonological traits from southern French as well as an abundance of morphosyntactic and lexical traits from Occitan (Boyer, 1990a).

3.4 | Diglossia in action

As Boyer (1991) noted, however, the usages outlined above are not fixed (except for official French, at least in theory) but mobile and constantly influencing one another. Occitan sociolinguists have thus asked how they are organized in practice. “Representation” is one of the tools mobilized to that effect, although with several different angles. Henri Boyer developed a research program from the 1980s onward in a conversation with social psychology on how people form social representations of language in diglossic situations and how those subsequently influence action. But Lafont’s materialist approach is concerned primarily with representation as a theatrical metaphor—as staging. How is diglossia performed publicly, in everyday actions but also in literature and in plays? Lafont’s approach clearly rejects concepts such as linguistic codes as too metaphysical (“we shall not talk about code shifting, precisely because the notion of code refers to a purely theoretical skill that overlooks performance” Lafont, 1997 [1983], p. 77). Lafont is thus also wary of approaches in terms of competence as they also presuppose essential categorizations of well-identified forms of language (Occitan, French, Francitan, etc.) outside of practice. He argues instead for a linguistics of *parole* that questions how linguistic repertoires are summoned, articulated, and contradict one another on the stage set by conflict. The issue of the limit between repertoires and forms is essential in this respect, but it is not predicated on essential categories: “one can even ask if the limit is not defined by its very mobile aspect; if it rests not in the locus of passage but in the feeling of passage” (Lafont, 1997 [1983], p. 76). But unlike Boyer’s work (dedicated to social representation), Lafont’s work hinges on the postulate that people’s actions are largely unconscious: diglossic representations are not accessible through asking, they are only accessible in people’s speech-as-social-action.

Consequently, diglossia in action is primarily a matter of erasure, what Lafont calls an ideology of erasure or concealment (*idéologie de l’effacement*, Lafont, 1997 [1979], p. 21). It masks the conflict at play in various ways. This process in turn leads to a dual dynamic in which “everything related to the dominated language is both devalued and overvalued” (Gardy & Lafont, 1981, p. 76). Consequently, Occitan could simultaneously be extolled by its traditional speakers, lauded by its poets, yet despised on a day-to-day basis and not passed on to the next generation. Occitan sociolinguistics thus warned against monumentalizing language—in bilingual street names for example, a practice that may consecrate a sacred linguistic order, yet a dead one, overlooking an effectively diglossic street (Lafont, 1984) and eventually presiding over the death of the traditional language.

A further manifestation of diglossic ideology lies in the central importance placed on the written word over the spoken one among language revival advocates, what Lafont termed a “revivalist ideology of the redemptive text” (Lafont, 1997 [1984], p. 114). This, he argued, was particularly visible in the action of the Felibrige and its emphasis on its literature-based revivalism. Literature, in turn, is ambiguous. Consciously depicting diglossia can both combat it and legitimize the linguistic standard meant to pave the way to normalization and dealienation, and serve as privileged ground for an alternative, fantasy refuge in which conflict is erased. A world in which the remnants of Occitan historical consciousness are allowed to form a parallel world, eschewing social conflicts and actual social reality.

4 | ROLLING UP DIGLOSSIA: A MATERIALIST APPROACH TO LANGUAGE REVIVAL

Occitan sociolinguistics emphasized the necessary emergence of a historical Occitan subject to foster dealienation. This contrasts, to a certain extent, with the stress on collective mobilization and contestation in Catalan scholarship (Lagarde, 2012; Pujolar, 2021, p. 149). In this final section, I argue that the response to linguistic minoritization proposed by Occitan sociolinguists is quite distinct. It provides a radical, materialist alternative to fishmanian culturalism.

On the surface, Fishman's (1991) "reversing language shift" (RSL) and Lafont's (1984) "rolling up of diglossia" (*retrousser la diglossie*) may look similar. Yet the very angle induced by the choice of terms gives away two different focuses. While Fishman's attention is on language, Lafont's is on diglossia and social processes of domination. While Fishman thus needs to demonstrate the usefulness and importance of the languages at stake, Lafont's work is concerned primarily not about language, but about the emergence of a collective voice.

Joshua Fishman is explicit about his own perspective. While he accepts matters of language and power are important, his work seeks to vindicate the central place of language in culture:

Particularly, [this book] rejects the view that intimate 'language-in-culture' concerns are 'merely folkloric romanticism' in comparison to purportedly worthier interests of power and conflict. There cannot be any secure RLS without both the one and the other, and the issue that must preoccupy us is when to pursue which and the true nature of the relationships between them both and intergenerational mother tongue transmission. (Fishman, 1991, p. 4)

This leads to several important consequences in terms of how language, identity and social processes were conceptualized and problematized. In this section, I focus first on issues of language and second on questions of identity. Finally, I explore some practical implications ensuing from those differences.

4.1 | Rolling up diglossia

Occitan sociolinguistics is not concerned with language as culture, or even about reversing language shift. "Rolling up diglossia," is not primarily about language for its own sake. It is about making socially marginalized voices heard in the public space:

On signalera, pour ce qu'elle peut apporter à une psychosociologie des contacts entre langues, la visée générale de cette reconquête: non pas tant reconquérir l'occitanophonie pour elle-même que libérer une parole condamnée socialement. (Lafont, 1971, p. 99)

We wish to point out, for what it can contribute to a psychosociology of language contact, the general aim of this reconquest: not so much to reconquer the practice of Occitan for itself as to liberate a socially condemned voice.

This approach is a response to a situation of social (rather than merely linguistic) condemnation. The "patois" were never condemned because they indexed place or local identities, or because they

threatened to feed regional nationalisms. They were downgraded because they were “signs of an inferior social condition,” “coarse languages spoken by labourers, peasants [...] and beasts” (Lafont, 1971, p. 96). The frontier between Occitan and French is historically a social one, rather than a geographic or a cultural one, hence the fact that language advocates are found among those for whom the passage to French is no longer questionable. Only then could Occitan become, at no social cost, become an object of poetic mobilization, and subsequently of politics.

Where then, does this leave the very possibility of language maintenance and restoration? Lafont and Gardy’s answer is clear: nowhere. Thinking in terms of revival and language shift reversal is not, in their perspective, a sound way of going about the issue. First because “For the coherent sociolinguist, there are never ‘questions of language’, but questions of society, which linguistic uses encompass as much as they derive from them” (Lafont, 1994, p. 134). Second because “one never maintains a linguistic usage, one cannot freeze the life of language” (Lafont, 1994, p. 141).

There is, in other words, nothing to reverse. There is, however, a diglossic condition in which collectives and individuals are socially dominated. If the current circumstances are in fact a product of a particular power structure, and if speakers view access to the new, dominant language as a way out of domination and as the route to a better life, it makes little sense to wish to return to a previous state of affairs—the social conditions of which no longer exist anyway.

The point of departure of Occitan sociolinguists is realist: it starts by considering existing power structures. Lafont’s main concern was perhaps *lo país*, a term which translates as “land” or “country” but refers to territory, people, and lived reality. *Lo país* is above all a set of social relations. Even without its language, and unless perhaps the entire population were to be replaced, speech (*la paraula*) and voices continue to exist and to express situated experience. It is this historical continuity that shapes Occitania as “a realist structuration of human space” (Lafont, 1979, pp. 47–48).

Consequently, the fight was to be carried out on numerous fronts, and not just with language in mind, but against the unequal material conditions of which diglossia is one of the expressions. It is thus not coincidental that Lafont (Lafont, 1998, p. 32) asked whether the practice of *normalització* in Catalonia might not just further diglossic conditions, only in reverse and in favor of a different social class. A radical, different program would entail dismantling the very social conditions that led to diglossia in the first place.

Reversing diglossia thus attacks the very material conditions of social organization. As such, a struggle for language cannot be led on the sole terrain of language. As Lafont (1991) put it, successfully reversing diglossia required joining forces with other social causes, especially with working-class movements. Yet, they would only join in, he wrote, on a program that preserved their means of production and their products, in other words their livelihood.

Conversely, the linguistic aspect of this struggle could only go hand in hand with the development of a wide social movement, aimed at displacing the diglossic subject. In its stead, there should be an Occitan subject, one equipped with a normalized, fully functional form of Occitan. There is nothing to be saved but there is a social project to be conducted, in which language occupies a central place. There is nothing to be reconstituted since restoration is necessarily bound to fail, since it relies on socioeconomic conditions that no longer exist. Reversing diglossia thus calls for a threefold linguistic program (Lafont, 2007 [1984b], pp. 102–103):

- First, the Occitan movement should make Occitan speech (*parole occitane*) autonomous with regard to French, and develop local cultural productions—in a language that depends on what people actually speak (local French/Francitan, standard French, different forms of Occitan, a mix of different forms).

- Second, legitimizing social speech (*parole sociale*), in particular in schools. This entails typically valuing positively everyday autochthonous speech productions in Francitan, the contact variety spoken by a vast majority of the population (at least when Lafont wrote).
- Third, proposing regional Occitan standards. Lafont rejected the localized forms of Occitan as the basis of a linguistic proposal made to the Occitan public on the grounds that they correspond to a way of life that was then (in 1984) fast disappearing and could not respond to the needs of contemporary life—in terms of media, long-distance communication, administration, education, and so on. Traditional dialectal usages would, however, be attached to the linguistic norm and valued in their own right. In this phase, Occitan linguists are meant to provide a functional tool to respond to the “demand for Occitan” that was, and still is, scattered across the land and across social groups, but very much present (Gardy 1985 in Boyer, 1991, p. 34).

The goal was not a unified field of speech but the redistribution of linguistic usage in Southern France in a way that would enable cultural and social autonomy. No absolute norm was meant to replace the rigid norm of French. Lafont is clear that once linguists propose a viable linguistic alternative, there is no way of predicting what its outcome if it gets adopted: “Linguists who put a standardized Occitan at the beginning of an activist process must understand that they will not find it unchanged in the end. This ‘surprise’ is the ransom of success” (Lafont, 1997 [1994], p. 107).

4.2 | Occitan alternatives to approaches in terms of identity

Conflict approaches to sociolinguistics are rooted in 1970s debates around issues of language and society. They are no longer dominant in sociolinguistics, but they could still productively yield interesting work on contemporary issues of language rights, language policy, and revitalization. In particular, they provide an alternative to sociolinguistics works that focus on issues of culture and identity.

Lafont identified identity (as well as nationalism) as a trap for language movements. It obscures social conflicts and instead values celebration, that is, with the type of language politics that the first language organizations in the nineteenth century eventually gave in to. In that sense, identity thinking is narcissistic and cuts off language advocacy from the other social struggles for social equality that it should necessarily join forces with or be a part of. Such an approach, Occitan sociolinguists contend, leads nowhere except to nostalgia and empty rituals. Identity politics, like nostalgia, are but a refuge into an alternative reality with no concrete effect in society. Identity is a comfortable place located both in space (in the form of fantasized interior exoticism) and time (childhood memories) (Lafont, 1994).

Identity escalation counts, in fact, as one of three “Occitan suicidal attitudes” alongside the dismissal of scientific knowledge and the rejection of the linguistic norm (Lafont, 1998). This approach is present already in Lafont’s 1965 paper on alienation, in which the term “identification” is used instead in preference to “identity” as a way to mark a process by which auto- and hetero-categorization processes occur as part of the dynamics of contact and conflict. “Rolling up diglossia” is a way to attend to social minorization; it replaces domination within a framework of class struggle in which equality is not akin to recognition alone, but also to a fair distribution of material resources.

In the conflict sociolinguistics perspective, identity is therefore a trope, one which is a part of diglossic ideology and of alienation (Lafont, 1989), and whose mobilization is sterile. Lafont’s early work can be read as an indictment of the long-standing retreat to identity politics of the Occitan movement, one which formed the basis of the Felibrige after its failure in the late nineteenth century. This may also explain, at least in part, why some of its members sided alongside the Vichy regime during the Second World War (Lafont, 1989).

5 | BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Occitan sociolinguistics was one of several attempts to think about language in society in a fast-changing world in the 1970s amid decolonization processes, agricultural mechanization, rural flight to cities, and internal migrations between the north and the south of France. Along with its more linguistic aspect (praxematics), this project features prominently alongside other projects in France (such as discourse analysis, or the Paris and Rouen sociolinguistics currents). Like those, it was deeply embedded in a left-wing political project of emancipation (although in many ways those movements can be read in the light of their engagement with the Communist Party, or lack thereof in the case of Lafont). Like the project developed by Marcellesi in Rouen (see Colonna, 2020b), Occitan sociolinguistics was interested in the historical emergence of languages as social objects. However, while Marcellesi, drawing on observations in his native Corsica, was interested in how speakers themselves define, categorize or name languages, Occitan sociolinguistics focus on social conditions of domination that result in diglossia and, most importantly, the erasure of collective voice. Contemporary Corsican sociolinguists have, however, engaged on a deeper level with the work of Lafont (Colonna, 2020a), perhaps as the language conditions on the island increasingly resembles the Occitan situation in the 1970s. A long-standing debate between Occitan and Swiss sociolinguists has also questioned the nature of language contact, with the Swiss camp arguing that a nonconflictual, allocational, approach is possible (Matthey & De Pietro, 1997).

Occitan sociolinguistics also echoes the project of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, an Occitan speaker from Bearn (Milhé, 2020). Despite being the godfather of the first Occitan-medium school (in Pau, Bearn), Bourdieu never engaged with Occitan sociolinguists or supported the cause. In fact, he used the Occitan case to develop his views on the work of language movements as social magic and struggles over categorization (1991 [1980] in particular). Lafont and Bourdieu never cited each other. In his review of Bourdieu's *Ce que parler veut dire*, Siblot (1983) does, however, suggest possible lines of collaboration between Bourdieu's sociolinguistic program. This would require bringing together Bourdieu's work on the circulation and the reception of linguistic products on linguistic markets, and the praxematic project of understanding the production of meaning in practice on markets of meaning.

As the practice of Occitan continued to decline, Occitan sociolinguistics retreated to the groves of Academe in the 1980s, after a series of interpersonal and political conflicts inside the Occitan movement. Those disputes rested on different conceptions of the socialism/nationalism nexus and revolved on a deep-seated conflict between Robert Lafont and Ives Roqueta. As Henri Jeanjean (1995) recounts, the tension also hinged on the direction the language movement should take, and the role of academic work within it. By 1980, the Institut d'Estudis Occitans was no longer an organization devoted mainly to producing original studies and had instead become a large association dedicated to popular education. Its almost 2000 members were mostly active in conducting language classes locally, not in producing new research. *Amiras*, an interdisciplinary journal that brought together studies in sociolinguistics, economics, sociology, history published in Ais-de-Provença ceased to exist in 1990. The main Occitan sociolinguistics journal, *Lengas*, still publishes two issues per year, however.

Along with this evolution, the links with Catalonia were transformed, perhaps inevitably as Catalan sociolinguistics increasingly became the source of official language policy. While Catalan is now an official language in several areas and while the language is vibrant in all domains of public and private life, Occitan is increasingly an element of a bygone past in most of its (former) territory. Lafont continued to write for a Catalan audience throughout his life however, and individual connexions endure (Christian Lagarde's work being a good example of this: a native Occitan speakers, he was a professor of Catalan at the University of Perpignan [see Pujol Berché, 2022]). Some links persist due to the

presence of an Occitan-language enclave in Catalonia, and to the fact that Occitan is now an official language in all of Catalonia. Yet, neither the *Revista de Llengua i Dret* or the *Treballs de Sociolingüística Catalana*, both important journals in Catalan sociolinguistics, have published articles indicative of any transborder dialogue in recent years. The last issue of *Lengas* bearing traces of a dialogue between Occitania and the Catalan-speaking areas dates from 2012.

The tools forged by Occitan sociolinguists were not meant to apply to the Occitan contexts only, however, and have productively been used elsewhere, for instance in Mexico (Hamel & Cruz, 1988). The history of academic approaches to language in society is long, complex and multifaceted. It is traversed by hesitations on the status of social action and mental representations, by the relation of language to the world and to ideas. The ideas set forth by Lafont and his colleagues are still available for sociolinguists seeking to practice a materialist form of sociolinguistics and to question language as a terrain upon which social inequality is reproduced or contested. Most importantly perhaps, they offer an invaluable source to think about and act upon language change, conflict and revitalization in ways that dispense with any form of *reductio ad identitatem*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to warmly thank everyone who generously contributed information and conversations towards this paper and who commented on early drafts, including Henri Boyer, Janet Connor, Monica Heller, Christian Lagarde, Noémie Marignier, Marinette Matthey, Claudine Moïse, Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin, and Joan Pujolar. I also wish to thank the editors of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* for their extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft.

ENDNOTES

¹ A *praxeme* is a linguistic unit (replacing the Saussurean sign) defined by its capacity to produce meaning in context through social action. In this approach, programs of meaning are always produced in culturally defined contexts marked by social conflict—language is always performed on the stage of power (Lafont, 1978, p. 84). Overall, praxematics can be thought of as a linguistics of conflict, in the same way that Occitan sociolinguistics is a sociolinguistics of conflict, and as an approach to language that places conflict at the center of all linguistic situation.

² I use Occitan graphic conventions (as opposed to French ones, generally used in English-language texts) for personal names, place-names, and names of organizations. Hence Frederic and not Frédéric, Felibrige and not Félibrige, Nîmes and not Nîmes, Ais de Provença and not Aix-en-Provence, and so on.

³ Unless otherwise stated, translations are mine.

⁴ A first-hand account by Andrieu Pradèl, one of the leaders of the strike, is available in Occitan in Roqueta et al. (1975).

⁵ A French translation appeared in 1967 in *Le fédéraliste*, reproduced in Lafont (1997, pp. 165–88).

⁶ This idea is found in Boyer (1990), but in a personal exchange in 2022 while preparing this paper Henri Boyer thought he had perhaps overstressed this point.

⁷ Catalan approaches to language ideologies do in fact form one of the sources informing North American linguistic anthropology (K. Woolard, personal communication).

⁸ The journal is currently published by the Montpellier university presses and is available in open access at the following URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/lengas/>.

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How to cite this article: Costa, J. (2023). A materialist take on minoritization, emancipation, and language revitalization: Occitan sociolinguistics since the 1970s. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12618>