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Master thesis

# Regional and linguistic identities: the North of France.

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## Table of contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Literature research</b>	<b>2</b>
2.1. The Nord – Pas-de-Calais region and its specific history	2
2.2. With old linguistic roots	3
2.3 The hard notion of identity	5
2.4. Regional identity	6
<b>3. Research methodology</b>	<b>8</b>
3.1 Research question	8
3.2 Interview type, questions building and choice of interviewees	8
3.3. Recording, sequential analysis and transcript	9
<b>4. Results</b>	<b>10</b>
4.1. What is the knowledge in the Ch'ti language nowadays?	10
4.2. The consciousness of the dialect's disappearance	10
4.3. Other elements on which the northern identity bases itself	11
4.4 Several ways to express the identity	11
<b>5. Discussion</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>15</b>

# 1. Introduction

I grew up travelling every year from the Haute-Savoie to the North of France to visit the part of my mother's family that lives there. I have fond memories of Easter holidays and Christmas celebrations.

Since only a few members of my family have a bit of a northern accent, the regional language "Ch'ti" was not really used in my family. I have experienced negative remarks and have seen dubious television programs about the North of France. Even some elements of my own language – passed on by my mother – were sometimes mocked because they did not correspond to the pronunciation in Haute-Savoie. In addition, as my father's family lives in Switzerland, I also had to change my vocabulary when moving to another country. For instance, a funfair in Haute-Savoie becomes a “ducasse” in the North of France and a “vogue” in Switzerland.

Later, the tri-national specificity of the Regional and European Project Management master's degree in which I enrolled in led to discussions of regional affiliations within the class. I realised that these elements of one's identity are important. When the opportunity arose to research regional and linguistic identities, I felt that I could learn more about the mechanisms of identity that drive individuals. Since languages are an integral part of my life, adding a linguistic aspect to it promised to make it very interesting.

This qualitative research is my contribution to the deconstruction of the stereotypes and prejudices surrounding the North of France. The research question I am trying to answer is formulated as follows: "Is a regional identity possible without identifying with a dialect or a regional accent?"

First comes literature research, the methodology followed in conducting the interviews and the results of these semi-structured interviews. I propose then a discussion of these results, my conclusion of this research and finally the bibliography on which I relied.

## 2. Literature research

### 2.1. The Nord – Pas-de-Calais region and its specific history

The former North - Pas-de-Calais region was merged with the Picardy region in January 2016 to form the new Hauts-de-France region (*La réforme territoriale*, s. d.). The region is situated right above Paris and continues to reach the English Channel. The region has asserted itself as "France's leading agricultural region" thanks to its great agricultural tradition (Rey et al., 2013a, p. 116).

However, these are not the first characteristic elements of the North - Pas-de-Calais. Even after its centuries of agriculture activities, the mining past of the Nord region is indeed what has been shaping its identity for almost two hundred years – from 1810 and the Napoleonic law authorising the private exploitation of coal mines on a delimited territory (Fontaine, 2017, p. 360) to the closure of the last mine shaft in 1990. A strong mining identity emerged in the region at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The region experienced a phenomenon that still shapes its social landscape today as strong waves of immigration to France from all over Europe until the post-World War II period. The North of France is indeed a “land of immigration” (Tévanian, 2009, p. 14).

The firsts to arrive were the Belgians who worked in mines in mines and for the industry of textile. They represented 40% of the foreign population in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dewitte, 2003, p. 17). Italian, more numerous, and Polish people migrated to France right after WWI, mainly for political and economic reasons. They were employed in the mines, as well as in the restoration or in the construction sectors. The linguistic landscape of the North evolved since Polish words appeared in the everyday speeches of minors (Ponty, 1999, p. 74). A new immigration wave occurred in the 60's. People emigrated from North-Africa and some Moroccans became minors as well (Dewitte, 2003, p. 73). Mineral fields were nationalised in the same period and coal foreign population considered as an inevitable source of energy for the following thirty years (*Mémoires de mines - Interview de Paul Gardent, directeur général des Houillères, sur la situation du Bassin minier - Ina.fr*, s. d.). The last mine in the North ceased its activity in 1990 (Hardy-Hémery, 2005, p. 236).

After the closing of French mineral fields, the region had to reinvent its economic activity. Railway construction, textile industry or the aquatic sector became important (Dubois Fresney, 2006, p. 30). Yet, the North of France is one of the poorest region of France today with a

20 000€/inhabitants GDP in 2002 (Dubois Fresney, 2006, p. 29). This social situation influences the region's reputation within France. People from the North are often perceived as strong alcoholics and as having less education than the rest of the population. It is hard to say which one plays the bigger role between a lack of knowledge or media. Is the accent from the North of France responsible for this reputation? Some vocabulary was explained in the movie *Bienvenue chez les ch'tis* : “kyin” stands for “chien” (dog) and “cha” for “ça” (this). The humorous scope of the movie already gave another vision of the North across France.

## 2.2. With old linguistic roots

The French Nordic dialect is very old. As the Romans invaded the Gaul in the latest century before Christ, the spread of the Latin language and the Christian influence began, even though it was slower in the North than in the South of the occupied territory (Rey et al., 2013a, p. 36). Another linguistic influence occurred with the Frank occupation in the North of Europe. Therefore, if the Romanic language spread across the entire territory, the Frank culture had however more influence in the North of Gaul than the Roman culture (Rey et al., 2013a).

This North-South separation became more visible during the Middle-Age, where the consciousness of several languages in France – the dialects and the Latin language – emerged around the year 850 (Rey et al., 2013a, p. 77). The northern dialects and Latin language will be called Oïl language, and the southern ones will be the Oc language – both words meaning “yes” in each area (Rey et al., 2013a, p. 81). French, or the *François* language, was a dialect at this time. It was spoken in Paris and its surroundings. The city was already important in the French kingdom and its dialect became the language of reference across the French territory (Rey et al., 2013a) as well as the *lingua franca* during the Hundred Years' War, helping soldiers from different regions to communicate (Rey et al., 2013a, pp. 110-111). Then, printing allowed writing to be codified (Rey et al., 2013a, p. 111) and made the influence of the *François* dialect stronger.

The Renaissance brought art and literature adoration (« Renaissance », 2022). Thus, and thanks to the normalisation of printing, the spread of a common language in the French elite kept growing while dialects in the Oïl territory started to disappear. However, due to its presumed advantageous landscape, the Picard dialect – from which the Ch'ti dialect comes – kept living for two hundred years (Rey et al., 2013a, p. 112). The wider learning of writing across the French territory contributed to this spread as well (Rey et al., 2013a, p. 118) and strengthened the power of the city of Paris and of the *François* dialect in the North region (Rey et al., 2013a,

p. 407). The inhabitants of the North were already conscious of the threat to their dialect and fought to keep it alive (Rey et al., 2013a, p. 407). However, even though the elite and rich farmers began to speak in French as well as to write in French, other farmers were still speaking in their mother dialect (Rey et al., 2013a, p. 116). Abusive words, disgraceful turns of phrase and unworthy sentences were erased from the vocabulary of the court, the nobility, and the royal family, leading to the emergence of value and social judgement between this refined French and the dialects from the rest of the kingdoms (Rey et al., 2013a).

The value judgement of dialects gets more and more stronger from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The “sublime” movement erased everything that was not considered as beautiful (LACOUÉ-LABARTHE, s. d.). For instance, the use of dialects was forbidden in poetry (Rey et al., 2013b, p. 28). Yet, the separation of the elite’s customs and the people’s ones were very different, and the dialects of common people were still present (Rey et al., 2013b, p. 40) and were, according to Rey et al. (2013b, p. 76), a channel for people to express their anger right before the French Revolution. The post-revolutionary period and the 18<sup>th</sup> century strengthened the French common language - appearing to be the best way to keep French people unified and united - and the decrease of the dialects was seen as inevitable (Rey et al., 2013b, pp. 125-126).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a large majority of French dialects were less and less spoken since the French language was used in trading activities, education and writings (Rey et al., 2013b, p. 218 and 170). However, even during this wilder normalisation of the French language, the Picard dialect is still better resisting than the others.

The First and Second World Wars played a role in this normalisation as well. According to Rey et al. (2013b, p. 269), the language spoken at the forefront was the French of the people coming from Paris. The immigration waves of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the apparent necessity to make dialects disappear in favour of the French language meant the end of the old French multilingual landscape (Rey et al., 2013b, p. 247).

Nowadays, despite the implementation of some initiatives to revive the dialects from the Defense and Promotion of the Oil Languages association (Défence et Promotion des Langues d’Oïl) or from the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, the fact that dialects are not orally transmitted between family members anymore makes their disappearance inevitable.

## 2.3 The hard notion of identity

I read several books or seminar reports in which authors try to give their definition of identity. I realised that even though every sociologist has different opinions about what identity is some common points can be found between them.

Levi-Strauss (Denieuil, 2009), as others will also explain later, speaks out about the apparent identity crisis of the populations in the 70's (Denieuil, 2009, p. 84). He differentiates two types of identities: the rational one and the one created within society by the influence of the group on the individual (Denieuil, 2009, p. 87). His most important idea is the implication of one's identity in a mechanism occurring thanks to interactions with the family members or the group requiring identification (Denieuil, 2009, p. 88). It is in this context of identity crisis that multiple debates on the term "identity" have emerged. Tap (1988, p. 1) also emphasizes on the fact that the construction and devt of the identity come from social interactions. Moreover, Tap (1988, p. 1) adds that identity is defined as being subjectively permanent through time (one *thinks* they are always being the same one) and that many dimensions create one identity (Tap, 1988, p. 3). Other aspects added by Tap (1988, pp. 4-5) are the role of the socialisation, the culture, and the collective identity (allowing to categorise individuals) in the construction of identity.

What was seen as identity crisis in the 70's and 80's became an identity "renewal" at the beginning of the 21st century by le *Manuel de culture générale* (General Culture Manual) published in 2004. Yet, this renewal is now mainly explained by nationalism and racism (Alcaud (dir.), 2004, p. 215). The Manual insists on the role of culture in the construction of identity by explaining that culture binds each individual to form a group and at the end the society (Alcaud (dir.), 2004, p. 219).

Di Méo (2016) adds a territorial side to the definition of identity. According to him, identity is first something personal (Di Méo, 2016, pp. 38-39) meaning that one is oneself by having relationships with others following cultural and societal codes. Secondly, to be able to be itself, the individual first interiorises its cultural and societal context (Di Méo, 2016, p. 39). Furthermore, the spatial-territorial dimension of identities is ensured through the interactions of individuals (Di Méo, 2016, p. 41). The fourth idea of Di Méo (2016) is the renewal of identity as well. He explains that social interactions shape individuals and groups through time and space (Di Méo, 2016, p. 42).

However, it is important to remember that these definitions are expressed in a French context and cannot be applied to every country or every person in the world, as explained by Demuth & Watzlawik (2021, p. 629).

The most important thing to keep from all the definitions above is certainly the idea of crisis or renewal of the identity. If our social interactions are shaped by the cultural and social context in which they occur, they also shape the identity of individuals living these interactions. Yet, in regard with all the possibilities of interactions existing, it seems then normal that identity can hardly be considered as permanent and keeps renewing or constructing itself throughout life.

## **2.4. Regional identity**

The task of defining regional identity is not easy. Both terms composing the notion are indeed already hard to define. Identity is defined above, but region is a word with lot of various definitions as well (Paasi & Metzger, 2017).

Culture is very linked to a territory or a region, and it is difficult to know whether the regional divisions of the past have shaped the cultures of today, or whether it is the different cultures that have influenced the delimitation of territories. Furthermore, regional and national cultures are often different. Balibar (1994, p. 58) explains that individuals must sometimes choose between their motherland or their community's autonomy and that politics play a role in this choice. However, being born in a specific region almost always means that the individual will be socialised through regional norms and codes of this region that the parents will transmit as well. According to Balibar (1994, p. 54), cultural identity always has two levels. Firstly, it is objective and subjective at the same time. Secondly, there is what one lives and what the community lives. Thirdly, cultural identity is both universal and singular. Fourthly, there is the Culture – that one learns at school – and there are cultures that emerged through social interactions.

Balibar (1994) does not link cultural identity to any kind of territory. Yet, Di Méo (2016, p. 43) insists on the role of “territoriality” in the individual's life and identity and on the importance of geographically situated culture. According to him, all dynamisms and “tensions” – when administrative boundaries do not respect cultural boundaries for example – that occur within a region contribute to the construction of the individual's identity. Regional identity is shaped by the different types of territorialities, which are subjective, political, cultural and socioeconomic.



However, only a few authors mention language in the construction of identity. The only ones that I found are Demuth & Watzlawik (2021). Furthermore, France has a particular relationship with multilingualism. For a long time, French has been considered as the purest language. It was mandatory to learn it at school, where dialects were prohibited. Yet, dialects were very often the mother tongue of people and a part of their identity. Demuth & Watzlawik (2021, p. 630) situate language as being in the heart of the construction of people's identity.

## **3. Research methodology**

### **3.1 Research question**

Defining the research question is a milestone of qualitative research. I knew that I wanted to know if one can identify with a region without speaking its dialect, as well as the role of dialects and accents in the regional identity. The necessity to keep both interrogations was important to me. This is why, I formulated the research question as follows: “Is a regional identity possible without identifying with a dialect or a regional accent?”

### **3.2 Interview type, questions building and choice of interviewees**

Choosing whether to conduct a narrative or semi-narrative interview is not an easy decision. However, having several questions to answer is reassuring for the interviewee, as well as having several questions to ask is reassuring for the interviewer. It is a way to keep the discussion in the research subject.

I wanted to have a first version of questions to test them with someone able to answer. Here is the first draft:

- What does the North - Pas-de-Calais region mean to you?
- To what extent do you identify with this region?
- How do you recognise a Ch'ti person? Do you feel Ch'ti?
- How could you illustrate the relationship to the Ch'ti regional language in the region?
- Do you speak the Ch'ti language? If yes, can you tell me more about how, where and when you learned it and how, when and where you practise it?
- Please give me an example of a sentence in the Ch'ti language.

I managed to test these questions with my mother who was born in the North of France. This test allowed me to find the good shape of the future interviews :

- What does the North - Pas-de-Calais region mean to you?
- How do you recognize a Ch'ti person?
- What shows the attachment to the Ch'ti dialect in the region?

- To what extent can you say that you identify with this region or not?
- Do you speak the Ch'ti language (or know Ch'ti terms)? If so, can you tell me more about how and where you learnt and practised it?
- Do you feel Ch'ti?

The most difficult task about choosing interviewees was to be sure that they are diverse enough to represent the population as well as possible. The four interviewees of this qualitative research are from different generations, female and male, have different professional activities. Three of them are born in the region and are living or have been living there for many years. The dean of the group is not born in the north but has been living in the region for 64 years. I considered those elements as proof of legitimacy to have a regional identity. The interviewees are, from the younger to the older, Manon, Barbara, Olivier and Yvonne.

### **3.3. Recording, sequential analysis and transcript**

Each interview was recorded on my phone and on my laptop. I made a sequential analysis for each of them to figure out if some common points or differences appear. These analyses helped to transcript the interviews. Indeed, I could easily notice which elements were not relevant for my research and thus did not transcript them.

All transcriptions were written thanks to the FOLKER software and follow the minimal, basic, and fine transcript codes of the GAT2 transcription convention.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. What is the knowledge in the Ch'ti language nowadays?**

Some dialect words and expressions were spontaneously mentioned by interviewees. The “wassingue” (a mop) or the verb “kère” (to go search for something and bring it back) were said several times. The interviewees also knew specific words and vocabulary, such as “erwette” (look at that) or “cochettes” (socks).

All interviewees answered that they learned these expressions thanks to family members who told them. Even Yvonne, who was not born in the North, explained that she learned her own dialect with her relatives. These declarations confirm the role of familial interactions in language learning.

Some mentioned other types of socialising environments, like hearing them on the street or in coffee shops.

### **4.2. The consciousness of the dialect's disappearance**

Despite their knowledge, all interviewees say that they know few dialect terms and are conscious that it is slowly disappearing from generation to generation. The younger interviewees mention the fact that their parents know more dialect terms than they do.

Yet almost all of them say that they would be able to know a person was coming from the North of France thanks to the accent. Only the younger one said that she could not recognise a northern person before having spoken with them and hearing some northern expressions. This difference between recognition of people from the same region depends on the generation in which the interviewee is born. The presence of the dialect was indeed stronger for people being born in older generations. Furthermore, Yvonne mentioned that when she was working in her diner, people used to speak in dialect with each other. According to her, lots of them passed away and she hardly finds someone speaking dialect in her surroundings today.

Moreover, the interviewees admit that they feel an absence of transmission of the dialect across the region. Olivier explains that there is indeed no radio in Ch'ti language, except for the horoscope. Manon adds that according to her, few want to make the dialect stronger again and she even thinks that people do not want to speak it.

The North of France's dialect is indeed often mocked. Manon goes on explaining that people do not want to speak the dialect because of its poor reputation both outside but also inside the region. Barbara mentions that she does not find it "gracious". The movie *Bienvenue chez les Ch'ti* however helped at giving a more humoristic and touching aspect to the dialect as well as to the North of France region and its people.

### **4.3. Other elements on which the northern identity bases itself**

Each interviewee confirms feeling as a Ch'ti person. However, this identity seems not very important to them and it may be because of the use of the term "Ch'ti".

When I asked the interviewees, none of them answered that the dialect or the accent is part of their identification to the region. What they answered is linked to other region's specificities. According to them, people are more reachable and welcoming than in other French regions they visited. Manon and Barbara already experienced life in the South of France and can easily testify to this difference. Yvonne came to the North with her husband and already noticed that as well. Their various social interactions allowed them to understand that they identify themselves to the North and not to other regions. According to Olivier, everyone tends to identify with their region of birth.

Meeting peers while living in another region is a way to feel one's identity. Manon explains that she started feeling belonging to the North when she moved out from the region and could meet some northern students in her new region. It was an opportunity to find some regional common points, sing regional songs, etc.

Their other elements of identification are related to the region's culture. First, the North's traditional food is a strong element of identification. Indeed, three of the interviewees mention it. Barbara compares the French fries shops in the North to the pizzas' in the South. Olivier and Yvonne mention respectively the potato-based meals and the coffee. Moreover, the North of France has a specific architecture. Houses are built with red bricks, giving a typical landscape to towns and villages in the region.

### **4.4 Several ways to express the identity**

Manon already experienced some poor remarks about her region of birth and says that this negative opinion on the region reinforces her regional identity. As she knows that these

opinions are born from clichés, she wants to deconstruct them. The political use of the socioeconomic reality of the region during the presidential election is, according to her, misleading and does not reflect the entire reality. Yet it is true that conservatives are more present in the North of France and she doesn't identify herself to this aspect.

Barbara expresses her regional identity in another way. As a mother, she tells her story and her link in the North of France through pictures and trips across the region. This idea of transmission is very important in the construction of the identity of her children as well as for her. Identity is indeed lifelong evolving.

## 5. Discussion

The most important point to discuss is according to me the idea of mobility that each interviewee experienced. Is the same kind of construction of identity possible when the mobility out of the birth region is forced? Is it possible to identify with a new region of residence, especially if there is no knowledge of the regional language or dialect?

I also would like to question the future of the Ch'ti dialect. The literature review and the interviews both show that the dialect is less and less spoken and that there is little willingness to reverse this phenomenon. However, some solutions already exist in other French regions, where the regional language is strong and protected. It could be interesting to figure out if they work in the North of France or not.

Finally, it is hard to find some research about the North's regional identity in France. Brittany is a region with a strong identity and lots of research is conducted about it. The North seems to be forgotten in the research landscape.

## **6. Conclusion**

It is clear that interviewees identify themselves to the North region. However, their identification is not constructed from the regional language at first, and the decrease of the dialect knowledge is certainly a cause of it. Their regional identity expresses itself through other elements such as the way people are easily welcoming others, the regional food or while living outside the region and meeting peers.

Thus, a regional identity is possible without speaking the regional language or identifying oneself to the dialect.



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