'Lou Provençau à l’Escolo’
A textbook attempt at saving a regional language
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Introduction
French is now spoken all over the present territory of France, even in the areas where previously another language was spoken, such as a German dialect in Alsace, Celtic Breton in Brittany, and Provençal in Provence. Many attempts have been made to maintain these other languages, and this article will outline the story of one such attempt of relatively recent origin in the case of Provençal.

French as a Romance language developed during early medieval times into two separate forms as spoken by people living to the north and south of the Loire valley (Figure 1).

These two forms of French became known as the Langue d’Oïl to the north and the Langue d’Oc to the south in accordance with the way in which the present French ‘oui’ was pronounced. A considerable literature was developed in the Langue d’Oc in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and Provençal was one of its principal forms. Its main literary form was poetic, though in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries many prose works were published dealing with legal, scientific and linguistic themes. In the centuries which followed, during the gradual development of the French kingdom under dynasties essentially based in Paris, the Langue d’Oïl or northern French began to dominate in administration and in literature. Provence was put under the jurisdiction of the French king, Louis XI, in 1482 and in 1535 Francis I consolidated the grip of French royal administration on Provençal institutions. In 1539, he promulgated the decree of Villers-Cotterêts, whereby all official acts were to be written in French. Nevertheless, the language spoken by the people in the south remained the Langue d’Oc: in the case of Provence to the east of the Rhône, this was known as Provençal, whilst in the areas to the west of the Rhône, the language is now referred to as Occitan. This was particularly true in the country districts, where very few peasant farmers or artisans spoke French, the Provençal language being a medium particularly adapted to their work and cultural activities. In large towns such as Marseille, French was the dominant idiom but mainly of the nobility and the bourgeoisie.

The Félibrige
In spite of the widespread use of Provençal as a popular idiom, by the beginning of the nineteenth century there was little contemporary Provençal literature, in part because there was no standard form of the language, and accents and spelling differed from place to place. In consequence, a group of Provençal speakers, of which Frédéric Mistral (1830–1914) was a prominent member, set up a society known as Le Félibrige in order to stimulate the redevelopment of Provençal writing to provide a firm basis for the continued use of the language (Clébert, 1983). To an extent they were successful and a growing number of Provençal works were published, the best known of which is undoubtedly Mistral’s own epic poem Mirèia (Mistral, 1859) the first of four such poems which he wrote. But many other members of the Félibrige, such as Joseph Roumanille (1818–1891), Théodore Aubanel (1829–1886), and Félix Gras (1844–1901) contributed to this revival. Given the variations in spoken and written Provençal, after much discussion which opposed especially those from Marseille and those from the Avignon area, it was decided to adopt the vocabulary and spelling based on a phonetic system which was favoured by most of the members of the Félibrige and is now acknowledged as the easiest to learn. Thus Mistral who had originally entitled his epic poem Miretba changed it to Mirèia. Mistral, between 1879 and 1887, contributed massively to the standardisation of Provençal by

1. Map of France.
producing a monumental dictionary of Provençal and other southern dialects which he called Lou Trésor doud Félitbrige. This was originally published in a sequence of parts, but was eventually produced in two volumes.

It was hoped in this way to standardise written Provençal, and since the script was phonetic, to standardise the pronunciation as well. But this meant that this new modern Provençal was based essentially on the language as spoken in the area encompassed by the Rhône to the west, the Durance to the north, the Crau to the south, and a line joining the Durance to the Etang de Berre in the east (Figure 2).


There was also another bone of contention between those who favoured the use of the word Occitan to denote the southern language rather than Provençal. This became a political issue in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Many Occitan partisans saw the maintenance of the regional language as a class struggle, whereas the followers of Mistral insisted it was a cultural issue. A detailed consideration of this debate is given in Helga Hentschläger’s (1981) ‘Lou Provençau à L’Escolo.

Provençal in the twentieth century

Although works in Provençal continued to be produced in the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is difficult to argue that the ‘genre’ was flourishing. Geoffrey Breton (1954) in his A short history of French literature states categorically that ‘a modern Provençal literature failed to develop’. The authors of Histoire de la Provence (Busquet et al., 1976) agree. They find that the Félitbrige’s ethos is essentially nostalgic, looking back to a golden past that is no more, and though their work has undoubted literary merit, it could not stop the integration of Provence into the mainstream of French culture. Indeed, the stress placed on folklore: regional costumes, fiestas, music, dancing and drama, served to draw in the tourists and settlers from other parts of France, from other European countries and from North America. These contributed to the nationalisation and even the internationalisation of Provence. Nevertheless some Provençal works continued to be published, and the associated cultural activities, implied for some, a necessary knowledge of the language.

Meanwhile, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the French educational system pursued its own development, particularly in the area of primary education. Thus the ‘loi Guizot’ of 1833 encouraged departments to set up primary schools and by 1882 primary education was both compulsory and free. But the language of instruction was French. The situation in many southern French primary schools was not dissimilar from that in many developing countries today, when children arriving at primary schools are taught in a language which is not the language spoken at home. Further there was then no provision for teaching Provençal during school time. Inevitably this situation was one in which there was little incentive for children to develop a taste for reading books of any kind in Provençal.

I first began to visit Provence in 1949 and got to know many families practising horticulture in the area south of Avignon centred at St Rémy de Provence and Chateaurenard. Frédéric Mistral was born and lived most of his life in the village of Maillane about 9 kilometres north-west of St Rémy de Provence (Mistral, 1906, 1928). At that time, all these farming families spoke Provençal at home and, although they could also speak standard French, it was clear they were happier speaking Provençal in their day to day tasks. Yet, with some notable exceptions, few read Provençal literature. Nevertheless, this echoed a profound attachment to the language, noted by a nineteenth-century British author, Duncan Craig (1863) writing about Provençal, ‘there still is dear to the hearts of millions, a language so sweet, so sonorous, so musical’.

Many teachers in the 1940s began to realise that unless something was done to stimulate the reading of Provençal, the language would inevitably die. Thus in 1946, was born the Association ‘Lou Provençau à l’Escolo’, whose aim was to help all teachers desirous of saving the Provençal language and its literature. The slogan, which became the leitmotiv of the movement, was ‘Une langue vaut bien une cathédrale’. This refers to the then current concern with restoring the architectural masterpieces of the past, and by analogy, it was felt that preserving a language was at least as valuable an enterprise. The members of the Association were mainly teachers from all levels of the public educational system in Provence who cherished a language which, in most cases, was spoken by themselves and their parents. They could argue in 1946 that Provençal was still widely spoken, that it possessed an abundant literature, but that modern technological developments in communications: telephone, radio and television,
were inimical to the oral tradition of Provençal since French was the medium used. Hence they averred, ‘Il faut donc parer aux défaillances de la tradition orale par une tradition de lecture’ (It is necessary to counter the limitations of the oral tradition by developing a reading tradition) (Dourguin, Mauron, 1952). These were not just pious words as several teachers had already conducted experiments in their schools to see how far it was possible to develop in pupils a taste for Provençal stories and poems. This was made possible by the existence, in the post-World War II French National Curriculum, of a weekly period of one hour devoted to activities which were not part of the compulsory curriculum. This hour could be used by teachers for activities which might reflect local concerns, and thus learning to read and appreciate Provençal literature could fit into such a slot with no difficulty. The Association was considerably helped by people who mattered in the regional Académie, namely the Inspecteur d’Académie, Albert Payan, the professor of Provençal at the University of Aix-en-Provence, Charles Rostaing, and the principals of the two training colleges in Aix-en-Provence.

Lou Provençau à l’Escolo

The Association decided to produce a textbook which they called Lou Provençau à l’Escolo (Provençal in School) (Figure 3) which would help teachers to carry out the task of getting pupils into the habit of reading Provençal, and of giving them a taste for the language and culture of their region. In drafting the book certain decisions had to be taken about the structure of the book, the spelling to be used, and the choice of readings to be included. It was decided to divide the book into the following sections:

1. A brief section on pronunciation. This was to help to standardise the pronunciation particularly of some vowel sounds which tended to differ from the standard French pronunciation, but also to indicate the values of diphthongs and triphthongs which are rare in French. It also served to indicate where the values of consonants differed from the French. For example the letter ‘j’ is pronounced dz. There is a final part concerned with where to place the stress (accent tonique) in pronouncing a word, as in spoken French there is little or no syllabic stress.

2. A set of readings which formed the main part of the book. These were graduated in such a way that shorter and simpler texts were placed in the early parts of that section, the texts gradually becoming longer and more complex. The decision was taken to use in the first two parts of the readings, the seasons, autumn, winter, spring and summer as a basis for selecting some of the texts. For example the second reading is the following short piece:

   **Li Fuei Morto**

   Pàuris aubre de la placeto! Si fuei lis abolandouno, l’abiage d’estièu pau à pau s’avalis! Li proumiéro jalado compliran l’obro dòu vent e li branquete meigrinello serviran plus d’ajoucadou is auce-lon aferjouli. Lou sòu es apaia de fui morto que l’escoubiaire de la comunu amoulounara emé soun escoubo de brusc pèr, piè, ié boufa fiò.

   Literally translated this gives:

   **Dead Leaves**

   Poor trees of the little square. Their leaves are abandoning them. Their summer clothes are little by little disappearing. The first frosts complement the work of the wind, and the thin twigs will no longer serve as perches for the birds chilled by the winter cold. The ground is covered with dead leaves that the municipal sweeper collects with his broom made of heather. Eventually he will set them on fire.

   To an extent many of these passages were predicated on the assumption that the pupils would be familiar with the changing nature of the countryside and agricultural activities over the year, which may not have been valid for urban children. The third part of the readings consists of a variety of texts taken mostly from the works of nineteenth and twentieth century Provençal authors, some of whom are alive today. The editors of the book have avoided including ancient Provençal literature which might have been difficult to decipher for primary and even secondary school children. For a scholarly review of old Provençal, readers are referred to Smith and Bergen’s *An old Provençal primer* (1984)

   3. A glossary (leissique in Provençal) of words used in the readings, with their equivalent in French.
There is also a vocabulary (voucabulari) of common Provençal words.

4. A précis of Provençal grammar (gramatico) stressing particularly the differences with French. For example there is no plural form for nouns and adjectives the plural form is essentially determined by the nature of the article preceding the noun or the adjective.

The authors

Members of the Association undertook the task of composing and collating the various parts of the book to make it ready for publication. Thus Charles Rostaing, then at the University of Aix-en-Provence, prepared the section on grammar, and Mlle Drutel, of the Collège Moderne also at Aix-en-Provence, undertook to draft the vocabulary. But, the bulk of the editing and of seeing the work through the press, was undertaken by those who feature as ‘authors’: Camille Dourguin (1894–1991) and Charles Mauron (1899–1966) (Figure 4).

Both these men were native Provençal speakers. Camille Dourguin was born in Maillane and had met Mistral as a boy and young man. He came from a modest family; his father was the village postman whilst his mother kept an inn which catered for travelling carterers who transported building stone from quarries in Les Alpilles (a limestone range of hills) to Avignon. The young Camille proved an able boy academically and won a place in the Ecole Normale de Garçons d’Aix-en-Provence, from which he graduated as an ‘instituteur’ (primary school teacher) in 1913. He was posted to the nearby village of Eyragues, but was only there a year before being conscripted into the French Army to fight in the front line during the 1914–18 war. He survived the conflict and on his return to civilian life obtained a post in the boys’ primary school in St Rémy de Provence. He married in 1920 Hélène Germain, an institutrice, who joined him in St Rémy and taught in the same school. Although he had to teach in French, he never lost his love of his native tongue, and did much to maintain Provençal culture by stimulating his pupils to recite poems and sing songs in Provençal. He therefore looked upon the task of producing the textbook as a labour of love.

Charles Mauron came from a somewhat more affluent background. Not only was his father head of the boys’ primary school in St Rémy de Provence, but he possessed land and property in the region and was mayor of St Rémy from 1936 to 1940, the date of his tragic death. Charles was able to pursue his studies to university level and became a research chemist at the Faculté des Sciences at the University in Marseille. Nevertheless, he was a firm supporter of the Provençal language which, like most of his generation, he spoke at home. Unfortunately, he was to lose his sight at a relatively young age, which put paid to his career as a chemist. He was by then married to another institutrice, Marie-Antoinette Roumanille. She became an author, and under her married name of Marie Mauron wrote novels and other works in both French and Provençal, celebrating Provençal life and culture (e.g. Mauron, 1953). Meanwhile, Charles had met and became friendly with Roger Fry, the English painter and art critic. As a result of many encounters with Fry, he started a second career as a translator of English novels into French and as a writer of aesthetic and literary criticism. He was to translate the works of E. M. Forster, T. E. Lawrence, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, and to publish works in which he applied psycho-analytic techniques to literary criticism (Mauron, 1957). His many researches into the psycho-criticism of the works of classical authors led to his obtaining a Doctorat d’Etat and a chair in the Faculté des Lettres of the University of Aix-Marseille where he taught from 1959 until his death in 1966. Charles Mauron also entered political life in the municipality of St Rémy de Provence, and was its mayor from the date of its liberation from the Germans in 1945 to 1959. Camille Dourguin was also a municipal councillor in the 1950s, and became a very close friend and collaborator of Charles Mauron and acted as a guide to take him from his home to the town hall and back again. They were in daily contact and consulted one another. Consequently it is not surprising that they worked together to publish Lou Provençau à l’Escolo.
Disseminating the textbook

The book was published in 1952 after Camille Dourgouin spent many hours correcting the proofs, something his collaborator could not do. The distribution of the book posed another problem since booksellers on the whole did not see its sale as a good commercial proposition. Some, known to the ‘authors’, did stock the book on a sale or return basis, but many copies were distributed from Dourgouin’s own home in St Rémy de Provence, where he held the main stock. Making the book known to teachers was done mainly through the activities of the Association Pédagogique ‘Lou Provençau à l’Escolo’ which published a three-monthly Bulletin, and through the various meetings and in-service courses run by the Association. I ought to add that the Association was active in other ways in order to promote Provençal. Ten years after its foundation, the Association produced the first number of Les Classiques Provençaux (Mistral, 1956) to be followed by other numbers in 1971 and 1974, (Mistral, 1971, D’Arbaud, 1974). The Bulletin also contained documents in Provençal which could be used by teachers in their classrooms. Camille Dourgouin, who was the Association’s indefatigable General Secretary, came to London in 1960 to record for Linguaphone various pieces of poetry and prose, so that an oral record remains of Provençal as spoken by someone for whom it was the mother tongue. This record was available for teaching purposes and was to be followed later by other recordings by native speakers, which involved theatre and music.

Perhaps not least in the Association’s relentless efforts to promote Provençal in schools was the lobbying of members of the French Parliament and Ministers of Education. The aim was to make possible the examining of Provençal in official examinations and particularly the ‘baccalauréat’. Clearly if the language could be one of those featuring as an option in the ‘baccalauréat’ examination, this would be a substantial incentive for students in southern French secondary schools to take up the language. At first Ministers were reluctant to accept such an option, in part because of the complications this would impose on the structure of the ‘baccalauréat’, but also because of the fear of encouraging fissiparous tendencies in French national life. Thus while the ‘loi Deixonne’ of 1951 allowed the teaching of regional languages, it was not until much later that such regional languages featured as an option in the ‘baccalauréat’ examination and were taken up by an appreciable number of candidates. Inevitably candidates and their parents wanted to know how far following such courses would be helpful for career purposes.

Subsequent developments

The publication of Lou Provençau à l’Escolo in 1952 proved to be a turning point in the struggle to get Provençal taught in the state education system in France. Since that time, the Association ‘Lou Provençau à l’Escolo’ has gone from strength to strength. The teaching of Provençal in the region Provence Côte d’Azur has expanded considerably in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of education. The textbook Lou Provençau à l’Escolo is now in its tenth edition, but is now mainly used in primary schools. For secondary schools, there were published Per Charra Prouvençau Part I (Pile, 1970) Part II (Martinent & Rostaing, 1979) and more recently Camin de Lengo, Débutants and Camin de Lengo 2 (Simian-Seisson et al, 2004). These more recent textbooks adopt an approach similar to modern language textbooks, with many pictures, drawings, puzzles and exercises to appeal to children of the television age.

The Association Pédagogique ‘Lou Provençau à l’Escolo’ now has an extensive publication list which includes not only textbooks for schools and classic nineteenth-century texts, but also current authors who write in Provençal, illustrated books for young children, and academic studies on specialist subjects. It also recognises that there are other versions of Provençal besides the one favoured by the Félibrige, known now as ‘Le Provençal rhodanien’, and publishes three anthologies of writings in the dialects of Nice, Marseille and the Var area.

Those who wish to teach Provençal now have access to courses in universities in the language and indeed need to possess a university certificate of proficiency in Provençal. The chair of Provençal at the University of Provence is at present held by Claude Mauron, the son of Charles Mauron, one of the authors of the original Lou Provençau à l’Escolo.

To conclude, whilst it is true that Provençal is no longer the day-to-day language of the people now living in Provence, it remains an artefact that is used by those who cherish the culture of Provence. To ensure its survival as such a cultural asset is the aim of the Association Pédagogique ‘Lou Provençau à l’Escolo’. Judging by the take up of Provençal in schools and universities and current publications of the Association, it seems to have met with some success.

References


**Acknowledgements**

I am most grateful to the following colleagues and friends who helped me to trace sources, provided information and cast a critical eye on the text: Alice Mauron, wife of the late Charles Mauron, who was able to supply me with vital historical information and gave useful advice on the drafting of the text; Nathalie Simian-Seisson, who teaches Provençal in secondary schools and provided information on current developments in its teaching; Mireille Graves (née Dourguin), who gave me access to some of her father’s documents and writings and the photograph of Dourguin and Mauron; Mala Samuels and the staff of the Institute of Education Library who responded willingly to my requests for inter-library loans.

Norman Graves who is bilingual (French/English) has taught in a variety of state secondary schools, at the University of Liverpool and at the Institute of Education, University of London where he was Professor of Geography Education and latterly Pro-Director (Professional Studies). He has published widely on education and geographical education in particular, his last book being School textbook research: the case of geography 1800–2000 (2001). He is currently working on a biography of the nineteenth-century textbook author, John Miller Dow Meiklejohn, who was Professor of Education at the University of St Andrews.