How do ”languages” appear? (Discourse on the ”Arpitan language” in France, Italy and Switzerland)

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Today, along with the abundant discourse on ”language death”, new ”languages” tend to appear. More precisely, while some actual linguistic practices become rare or completely disappear, idioms that would be perceived as ”dialects” of national languages become recognised as separate ”languages”, on regional, national or / and supranational levels.

I explore this process of promotion in status in relation to one Romance idiom: Francoprovençal, or Arpitan as it is called by language activists. Namely I examine the discourse strategies of language and identity construction in three countries where the idiom is spoken: France, Italy and Switzerland. The analysis is based on fieldwork data collected in the three States (interviews and participant observation since 2009), as well as on texts produced by language activists and political authorities.

The geopolitical trans-border aspect of this linguistic community raises two important issues. On the one hand, it allows examining how the discourse about the same idiom varies in different countries, i.e. what impact different political, social and economic environments have on discourse about ”regional languages”. The political contexts studied include two poles: France as a highly centralised monolingual State and Switzerland as a highly decentralised multilingual federal state, and, in this respect, they provide an interesting ground for comparison. On the other hand, it allows investigating how the existing State borders function, and namely the concurrence of regional, national, supranational or alternative trans-border allegiances and identities.

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