

LANGUAGE VITALITY AND LANGUAGE ATTITUDES TOWARDS BERRICHON, A REGIONAL LANGUAGE IN FRANCE: INSIGHTS FROM A PILOT STUDY

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Introduction

The goal of this paper is to shed light on the linguistic situation of Berrichon, a regional language in France. Regional languages in France are in decline (Clanché, 2002). They are often perceived negatively, especially those belonging to the *langue d'oïl* family (Forlot, 2009; McCrea, 2018). Berrichon is at the end of a long period of decline spanning centuries, and the last remaining speakers are disappearing quickly. The present study aims to better understand the current language vitality of Berrichon, an issue that has barely been studied. Because of its proximity to Standard French (SF) (both Berrichon and SF are *langues d'oïl*), Berrichon is usually seen as a dialect of French or a deformed form of French. This leads Berrichon to be perceived as not being worth transmitting to children, especially in a world where languages like English are considered to be more important.

In the present study, participants filled out a questionnaire on their language practices and attitudes toward Berrichon. It was hypothesized that most participants would agree that Berrichon is endangered and would stop being spoken in the next years, but also that they would have negative perceptions of the language. This hypothesis comes from the fact that SF has been dominant in France for centuries, and also because negative perceptions around regional languages and dialects are very strong throughout the country.

1. Regional languages in France and Berrichon

1.1 A brief historical and linguistic context of regional languages in France

It is a common misconception outside of France to think that SF is the only native language of the country. While it is the official language of France, many regional languages are spoken alongside SF. France is very often divided into two parts: the northern part where different *langues d'oïl* are spoken, and the southern part where different *langues d'oc* are spoken. The plural term *langues d'oïl* refers to individual languages of the *langue d'oïl* (singular) family such as Picard, Norman, Berrichon, and even SF (McCrea, 2018). While this division between the southern and northern parts of France allows us to see where the *langues d'oïl* and *langues d'oc* are spoken, other languages from different language families also belong to the category of regional languages in France. This includes Romance languages like Catalan, spoken in the very southern part of France, Franco-

Provençal, spoken in the mid-eastern part of France, and Corsican, spoken in Corsica. Some non-Romance languages are also spoken in the country such as Breton (a Celtic language), Alsatian (a Germanic language), and Basque (an isolate).

As can be seen from this brief description, multiple regional languages are spoken in France, but they remain minority languages. These regional languages were first recognized as being part of the cultural heritage of the country only in 2008 by the *loi constitutionnelle du 23 juillet 2008 de modernisation des institutions de la Ve République* [French constitutional law of July 23rd, 2008 to modernize the institutions of the 5th Republic] (Conseil constitutionnel, 2008). While the status of these languages remains at the heart of many debates in France, the number of speakers of regional languages keeps diminishing over the years. Most of these languages are considered to be in an endangered position. For example, the *UNESCO Atlas of the world's languages in danger* indexes 26 languages in France as being vulnerable to severely endangered (Moseley, 2010). However, the *UNESCO Atlas* does not identify every regional language spoken in France.

The importance of SF has changed and increased over centuries, leading to the current linguistic situation. The French Revolution had a tremendous impact on the linguistic situation of France which was already starting to shape around SF. Based on the Jacobin ideology that appeared during and after the French Revolution, it was believed that the Republic should have only one language. This led Parisian French to be used as a standard to unite the French, developing into what is today known as SF (Ager, 1999; Bell, 2003; McCrea, 2018; Rickard, 1989). Thus the French language was used as a unifying factor in establishing a French national identity (Bell, 2003; McCrea, 2018), and this still can be seen today. The French Revolution, and more specifically the Terror Period that followed, perceived regional languages to be obstacles, and even threats, to the Republic (Balibar & Laporte, 1974; Lyons, 1981; Oakes, 2011), while SF was seen as “the language of enlightenment and democracy” (Lyons, 1981, p. 268). After this period, during the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, linguistic perceptions in favour of a single language became stronger in France, which led to a decline in the use of regional languages (Lyons, 1981). This decline was not limited to the 19th century but continued throughout the 20th century as well (Clanché, 2002; Héran et al., 2002), as SF became more and more embedded in French society. Events such as World War I also indirectly contributed to this decline, as soldiers from different parts of the country were compelled to use SF to understand each other. Access to school, where only SF was used, became progressively easier during the 20th century, therefore also contributing to the dominance of SF.

Even though regional languages are currently gaining more importance and were recently recognized as minority languages in the country, they remain in a difficult position, as the idea that they are a threat to national unity remains (Ager, 1999). To this day, the notion of unity and national identity through the use of SF is still strong and persistent but is also combined with the belief that promoting regional languages would be a threat to SF itself (Roger, 2018). In this context, it can be noted that *langues d'oïl* are facing more challenges. Due to their similarities to SF, as they are from the same language family and share many common characteristics, they are perceived as being a deformation of SF or being an incorrect, ungrammatical form of French (Auger & Villeneuve, 2017; Forlot, 2009; McCrea, 2018). Although *langues d'oïl* have similarities with SF, or with

other *langues d'oïl*, it does not mean that they are always mutually comprehensible. At the same time, it can be noted that regional languages and dialects, and especially *langues d'oïl*, are very often referred to as *patois*, which is a word frequently used with a negative connotation, even though speakers may use it without this intention (Hall, 2017).

1.2 Where Berrichon is spoken

Berrichon is a *langue d'oïl* spoken in the Berry area, a province located in central France. More specifically, Berrichon is spoken mostly in the department of Cher and Indre (Figure 1). However, because dialect and language borders do not specifically match political borders, it is possible to have speakers of Berrichon in other departments near the Berry area.

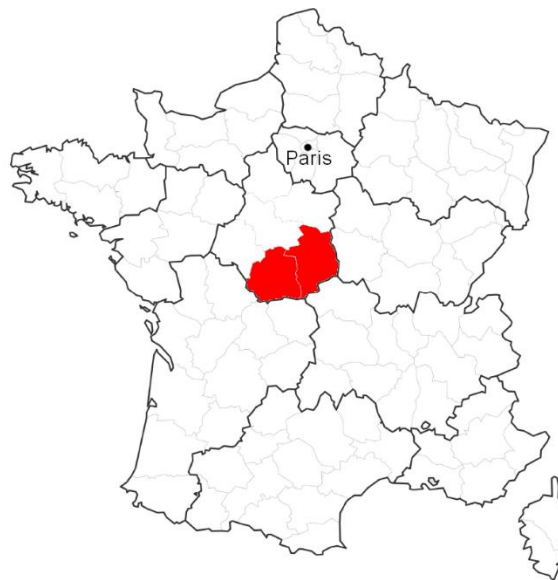


Figure 1: Map of continental France, divided by regions (black lines) and departments (gray lines). The Berry area is coloured red on the map, which corresponds to the department of Cher (right) and Indre (left). Modified from Carte de France vierge in *Villes.fr*, n.d., Retrieved July 5, 2021, from <https://www.villes.fr/carte-france-vierge/>.

Berrichon is not a uniform language but includes different dialects that are generally mutually comprehensible. Berrichon is often divided into two main dialects spoken in each department respectively. However, further research on the description of the different dialects that constitute Berrichon, and their precise location, is needed.

2. Methodology

A link to an online questionnaire in French (using Qualtrics) was given to the participants to gather information on their language practices regarding Berrichon as well as their attitudes towards the language. The link was distributed to acquaintances of the researcher, but respondents were also encouraged to share it with their own acquaintances, creating a

snowball effect. There are two reasons why an online questionnaire rather than a paper version was used. First, the context of COVID-19 and the restrictions that came with it, made it difficult to travel and meet people in person, and second, the researcher was not in the area during the research stage. An online questionnaire also proved to be more practical as it allowed participants to remain completely anonymous and to fill out the questionnaire from any location.

Most of the questions were quantitative but there were also some that involved qualitative aspects of the language. The quantitative questions focused on participants' language proficiency, their language practices as well as their language use (such as the contexts in which Berrichon is spoken). Such questions help us better understand the language vitality of Berrichon, which has not yet been discussed in previous research, but also help us understand the language shift from Berrichon to SF. This language shift is not limited to Berrichon but is happening in many other *langues d'oïl* as well (Hornsby, 2006, 2009).

The qualitative aspect of the questionnaire was designed to gather information on the different positions, points of view, and perceptions of Berrichon that members of the community can have. These questions are important because they provide information on what people think of Berrichon in a context where regional languages are often stigmatized, particularly the *langues d'oïl*. The qualitative aspect of the questionnaire is also important because the responses can be compared with perceptions that exist for other regional languages in France, especially the ones in a similar situation to Berrichon. The questionnaire was influenced by the work of Mignerot & Blanchet on the Gallo language (Mignerot & Blanchet, 2018). Because Gallo is another *langue d'oïl* in France in a situation of endangerment, it was evident that such a study would be of help in the preparation of the current questionnaire.

The study gathered responses from 20 participants, providing an initial understanding of some of their language practices as well as their perceptions of Berrichon. Because this study is a pilot project, the methodology described here aims at giving a glimpse of the linguistic situation of Berrichon and laying a foundation for future research on its vitality. This small number of participants also stems from the fact that when it comes to regional languages, and especially the *langues d'oïl* in France, many people express some disinterest, or even negative attitudes, towards the topic.

Most of the participants expressed some interest in Berrichon in their answers to the questionnaire. However, it is important to keep in mind that these participants are not representative of the entire Berrichon language community since they were recruited because of their interest in the language. The results of the questionnaire were analyzed in Excel and SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

3. Results

3.1 Demographics

The age of the 20 participants varied from 25 years old to 84 years old, with a mean of 54 years old (Figure 2). Nine of the participants were men and 11 were women.

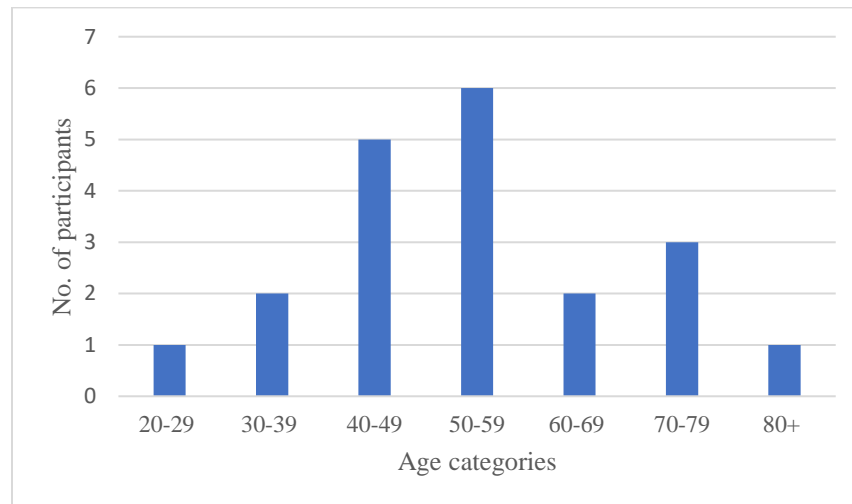


Figure 2: Distribution of participants' age

All but one of the participants had spent most of their life in the Berry area. Some of them had grown up in the area, moved away as young adults and returned later in life, while others had spent their entire life in the area. A few participants had grown up in the area but moved to a different place later in their life.

3.2 Language practices

To better understand patterns of language use and language transmission, the first questions addressed the linguistic practices of the respondents, which were revealed to be quite limited. When asked “How well do you understand Berrichon?” the following results were observed (Figure 3):

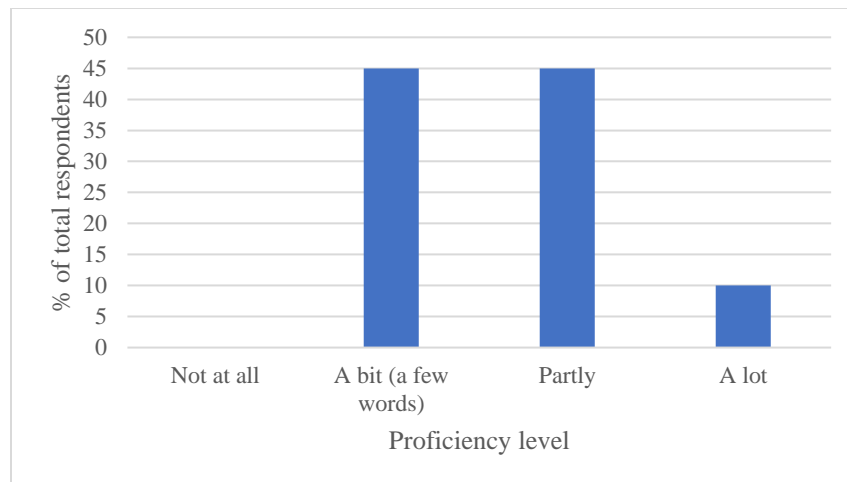


Figure 3: Perceived ability to understand Berrichon

Only 10% chose “a lot” whereas 45% said they understand it “partly” and another 45% answered that they understand Berrichon “a bit (a few words)”. While the percentage of “a lot” is relatively low compared to the other answers, it is interesting to note that no one chose the option “not at all”, which can be explained by the fact that people who participated had expressed some initial interest in Berrichon. Following on that, responses to the question “How well do you speak Berrichon?” shows that when it comes to speaking, language practices were quite different (Figure 4).

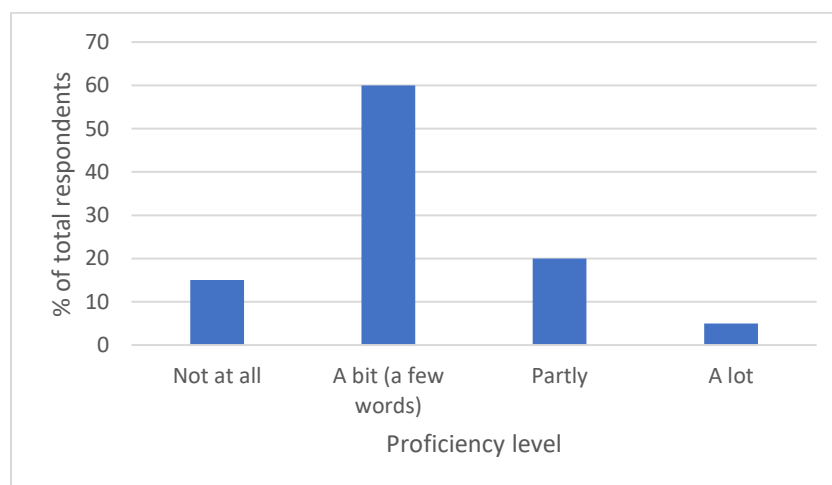


Figure 4: Perceived ability to speak Berrichon

This time 15% answered “not at all”, 60% answered “a bit (a few words)”, and only 20% responded with “partly”. Only 1 respondent said “a lot” in their questionnaire (reflecting the remaining 5%). These different results show that the language practices of the participants remain mostly limited to a small understanding of Berrichon and very limited speaking practices.

When analyzing the ability to understand and speak Berrichon by age, it appears that older participants understand and speak Berrichon more proficiently than younger participants (Figures 5 and 6).

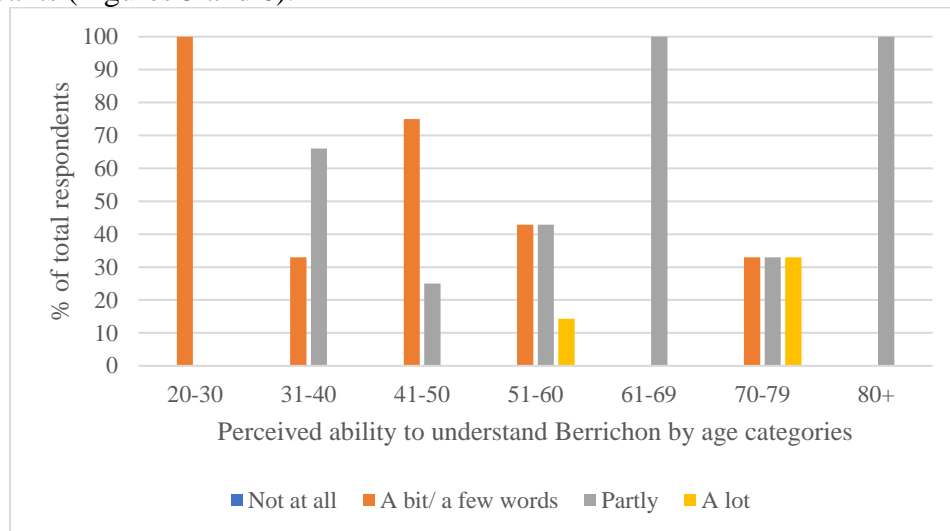


Figure 5: Perceived ability to understand Berrichon by age, by percentage of respondents for each category

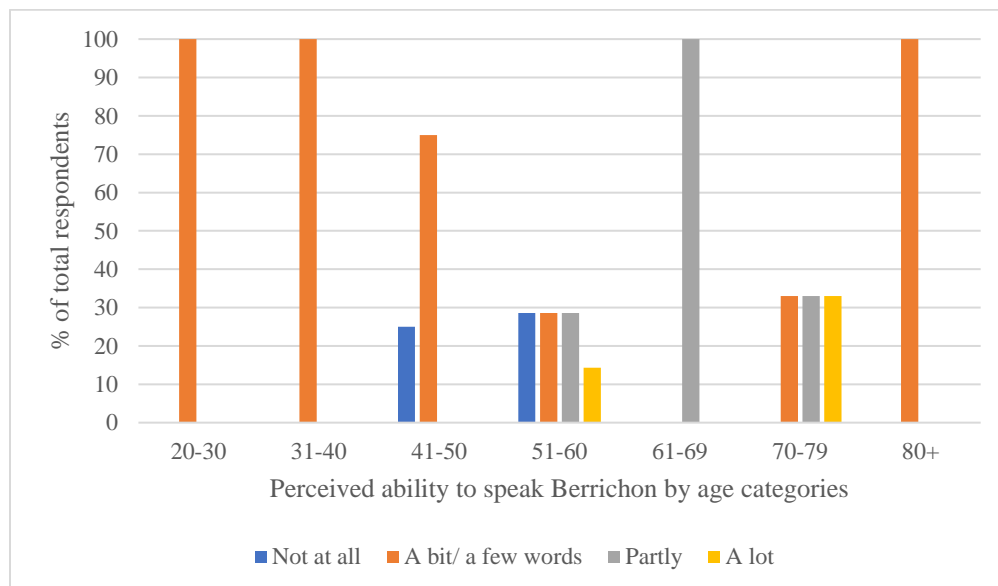


Figure 6: Perceived ability to speak Berrichon by age, by percentage of respondents for each category

In the responses, “understanding Berrichon a lot” (Fig.5) starts to appear in the age category 51-60 years old, and “speaking Berrichon a lot” (Fig. 6) appears in the age categories 51-60 years old and 71 and plus. “Partly” understand Berrichon is answered starting from the age category 31-40 years old, but for speaking it only starts with the age category 51-60 years old. These different comparisons show that the linguistic competence

in Berrichon from participants remains limited on average, and the more fluent speakers are among the oldest participants in the study. When it comes to language vitality, when younger speakers are less fluent or competent in the language, they are less likely to transmit the language. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to determine if there was a relationship between age and the ability to speak Berrichon. There is a positive correlation between age and the ability to speak Berrichon, between the two variables $r = .452$ and $n = 20$, with a significant relationship ($p = .045$), showing that the older participants are, the more likely they will speak Berrichon. However, while there is a positive correlation between age and the ability to understand Berrichon ($r = .421$ and $n = 20$), there was no significant relationship ($p = .064$).

In addition to language practices, language transmission is an important factor in understanding the vitality of a language. Participants who had children under the age of 18 were asked to describe their children's linguistic practices. Half the respondents (10 people) answered that question (Figure 7).

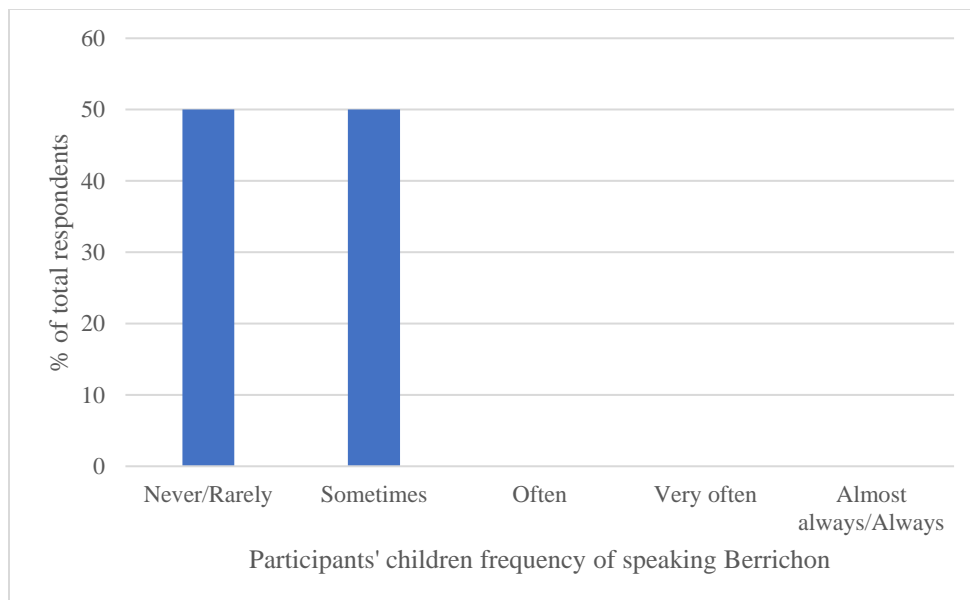


Figure 7: How frequently participants' children speak Berrichon, by percentage of respondents

In this sample, half of them mentioned that their children never or rarely use Berrichon, and the other half mentioned that if their children did use Berrichon it was only sometimes.

3.3 Attitudes toward Berrichon and perceived language vitality

Multiple questions in this questionnaire showed that participants had a strong interest in the cultural importance of Berrichon. When asked if they feel that speaking Berrichon is or is not important, most of them agreed that it was important, as shown by the 65% who selected "a bit important", "fairly important" or "very important (Figure 8).

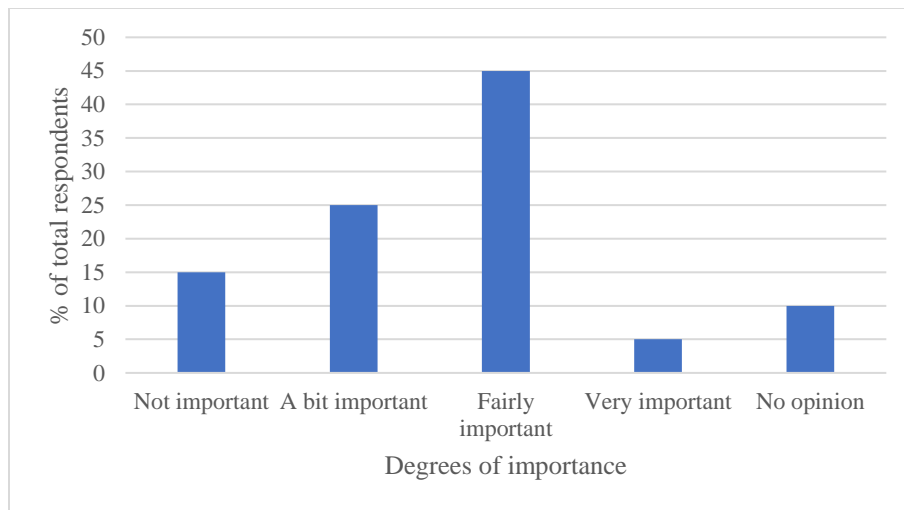


Figure 8: Importance of speaking Berrichon, by percentage of respondents

When asked the question “Is it important for you that there continues to be speakers of Berrichon?”, most participants find it important to have speakers of Berrichon (Figure 9).

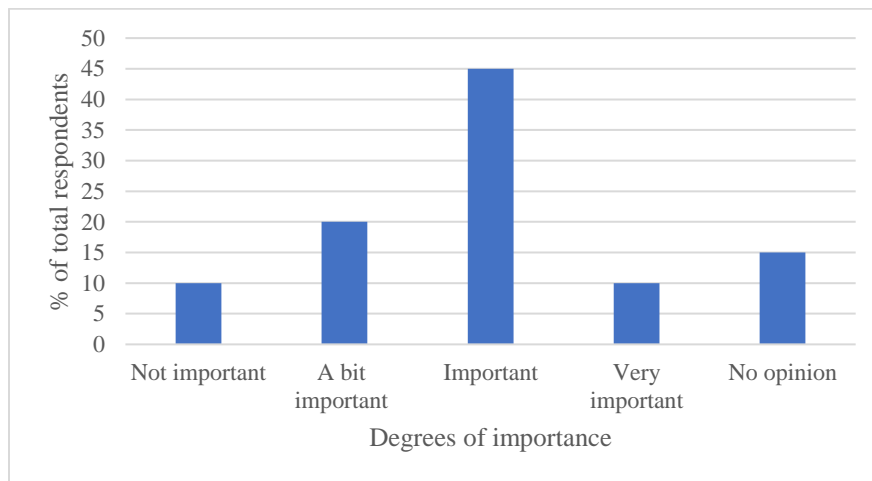


Figure 9: Importance of having speakers of Berrichon, by percentage of respondents

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, when asked directly about what participants think of the language vitality of Berrichon, most participants agreed that Berrichon was in decline (Figure 10).

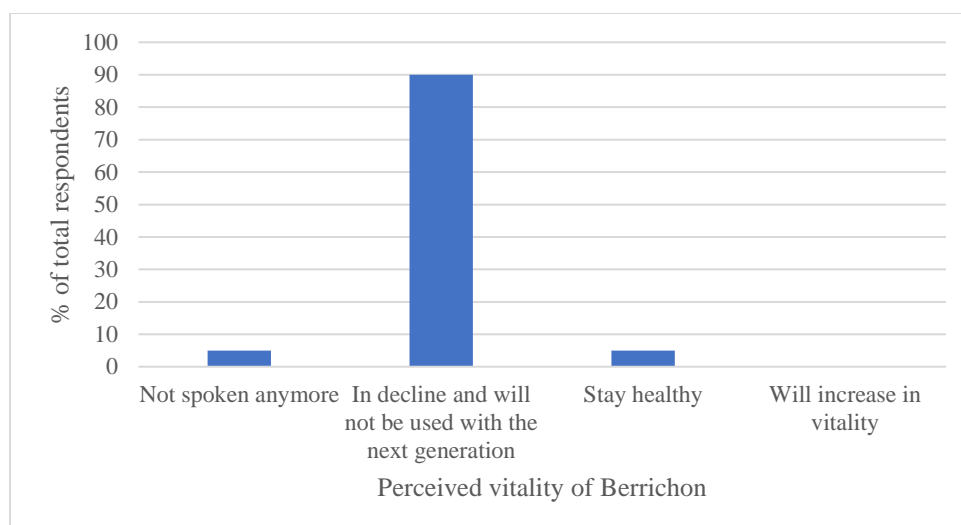


Figure 10: Perceived vitality of Berrichon, by percentage of respondents

18 out of the 20 respondents thought that “Berrichon is in decline and will not be used with the next generation”, while one respondent declared that “Berrichon was not used anymore” and another one answered that “the linguistic situation of Berrichon is fine and will not change”. Such a question, and the answers that go with it, show that most of the participants are aware of the linguistic situation of Berrichon and its potential disappearance in the coming years. It also confirms the linguistic practices described so far and their consequences. To these answers, it can be added that most participants considered most speakers of Berrichon to be older (Figure 11).

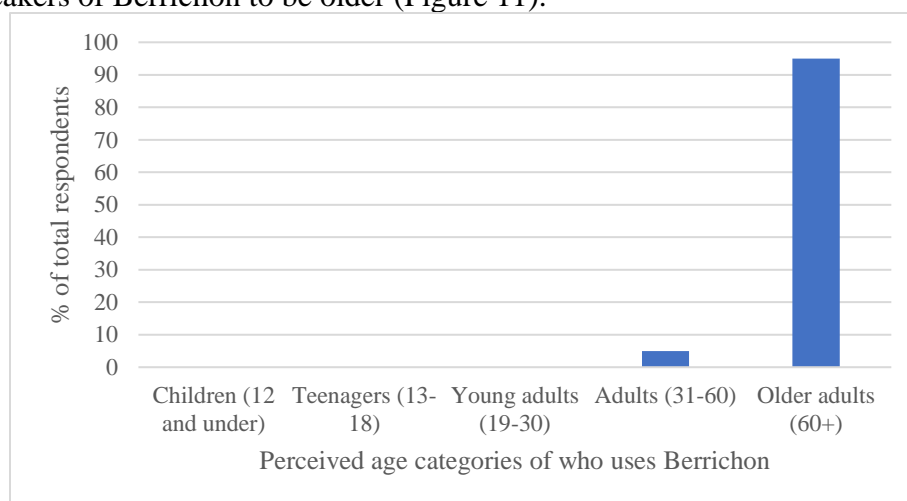


Figure 11: Perceived age categories of who uses Berrichon, by percentage of participants

When asked about the age category that uses Berrichon the most, most participants agreed on the category older adults, being 60 years old and more (95%), while one respondent answered with adults between 31 and 60 (5%).

4. Discussion

4.1 Cultural importance of Berrichon

When the participants were asked whether they think it is important to speak Berrichon, most of them expressed positive views, or neutral views, towards this question. Only one respondent showed a lack of interest in speaking Berrichon, describing Berrichon as being barely used and barely understood, making it useless (“trop peu usité et peu compris, rendant l'emploi du berrichon inutile”). For many participants Berrichon is culturally important, shown in answers like “it is our cultural heritage” (“C’est notre héritage culturel”), “Berrichon is a part of our heritage” (“Le Berrichon fait partie de notre patrimoine”) or Berrichon is part of the “cultural tradition” (“tradition culturelle”) of the area.

Although most of the responses emphasized the cultural importance of Berrichon, some showed negative perceptions of the language. For example, one respondent described Berrichon as “not a real language but only a deformed French” (“Le berrichon n'est pas une vraie langue. C'est du français déformé.”). While this example remains isolated in the data from this study, it still shows that negative perceptions and stigmatization of Berrichon exist although they do not appear to be too strong.

Most of the participants thought it was important or very important that there continues to be Berrichon speakers. However, almost a third of the sample thought it was only a bit important or not important at all. These results show that Berrichon is not perceived negatively by all the participants but rather by a small portion of them. The idea of preserving Berrichon through speakers of the language is strongly linked to the cultural aspects that Berrichon represents. Responses to questions where participants had the opportunity to detail their thoughts on the importance of having Berrichon speakers revealed again the value of culture. Some mentioned that “the oral transmission of the regional language is as important as a piece of art or a local specialty” (“la transmission orale de la langue régionale est aussi importante qu'une œuvre ou une spécialité régionale”) or that it is important to have speakers to “preserve the patois that is part of our culture”¹ (“Pour conserver ce patois qui est une partie de notre culture”). While some respondents did not necessarily consider it important that there continues to be Berrichon speakers, they still emphasized the fact that it was part of the heritage of the region: “It is not important, but it is sad to let a part of the regional heritage disappear” (“Ce n'est pas très important mais il est regrettable de laisser disparaître une partie du patrimoine régional”).

As can be seen from the responses, there is not an overwhelming stigmatization of Berrichon coming from the participants, but mostly positive points of view related to this regional language. There could be several reasons for this, such as the fact that the sample used here is not representative of the general population of the Berry area, or that the stigma towards regional languages, in this case towards Berrichon, is changing. Community members’ positive attitudes toward their language can play an important part in language maintenance and revitalization, and are one of the factors used in some scales to evaluate

¹ It can be noted here that the participant that gave this answer did not use the word “patois” with a negative connotation.

language endangerment (Moseley, 2010). At the same time, as mentioned, the idea of Berrichon being a part of the past is also prevalent in these answers, showing that while participants may think of Berrichon as being important for the local culture, this importance remains limited to being a part of history rather than the future.

4.2 The future of Berrichon: a relic of the past?

In open questions regarding Berrichon, two themes emerged: Berrichon appears to be part of the cultural heritage of the participants, but at the same time Berrichon appears to be a relic of the past. Many participants showed that they expressed having some degree of importance when it comes to the idea of preserving Berrichon. When talking about the language, someone mentioned that “it’s kind of part of our heritage therefore it’s important to preserve it” (“Ça fait partie en quelques sortes du patrimoine, donc important à sauvegarder”), while someone else mentioned the idea of “keeping the memory of the local culture” (“garder la mémoire de la culture locale”). The lexical field of memory, therefore, appears frequently in the participants’ answers, with words like “mémoire” (memory), “history” (history), and “préserver” (to preserve). This can be seen strongly in some answers like “It is my origins, I want to keep some part of it” (“Ce sont mes origines, j’ai envie d’en garder un peu la mémoire”); “I think it is important to preserve our cultural heritage” (“Je pense qu’il est important de préserver son héritage culturel”). Other answers directly state that Berrichon is part of the past: “it is good that this form of culture doesn’t get lost. We can also find in it the history of the French language” (“Il est bon que cette forme de culture ne se perde pas. On peut y retrouver également l’histoire de la langue française”).

This idea of preservation shows some importance towards Berrichon from the participants, but it is also intertwined with the idea that Berrichon is a relic of the past. While the will to see the language being preserved seems like a good point in favour of making the language not disappear, it also appears as a double-edged sword that places Berrichon as being part of the past. This point appears strongly in comments like “this is part of the history of the region, but we can’t be nostalgic for a long-gone period of time” (“c’est fait partie de l’histoire de notre région mais on ne peut être nostalgique d’une époque révolue”). This aspect is also important to consider in the context of language revitalization: if Berrichon is part of the past then the importance of preserving/revitalizing the language may appear to be limited. While participants may emphasize the importance of Berrichon as a part of the local culture of the area, any language revitalization effort may be constrained by the view that Berrichon belongs to the past.

Furthermore, participants had the chance to give their opinions on how important it is to teach Berrichon in schools. In some of the responses, schools were seen as a place that can help preserve Berrichon for its historical and cultural aspects rather than a place to teach the language itself. This can be seen in answers stating that schools can be important for “preserving the culture” (“À des fins de préservation de cette culture”), or “to keep the memory of the local culture” (“garder la mémoire de la culture locale.”). Other participants mentioned that schools can be a place to learn about Berrichon, although not through direct teaching but by “presenting texts, poems, or songs, to keep it [Berrichon] in mind” (“Pas

forcément enseigné mais présenté à l'aide de textes, de poèmes, de chansons pour le garder en mémoire.”); or to “learn stories, poems, in order for Berrichon to stay in the collective memory” (“Apprendre des histoires, des poèmes pour que ça reste dans la mémoire collective”). However, some answers were more direct and negative towards the place of schools in teaching Berrichon, stating that “public schools should not have to teach dialects of the past” (“L’école de la république n’a pas à enseigner les dialectes d’un autre temps !!”), while others claimed that teaching Berrichon in school is “useless” (“inutile”).

The different points mentioned in the results and the discussion show that, as hypothesized, Berrichon is used less and less often, showing that the language is in decline. However, while it was predicted that perceptions of Berrichon would be mostly neutral or negative, it appears that the participants had mostly positive attitudes towards the language, especially regarding its ties to culture and history. This cultural aspect, though, appeared to be intertwined with the idea that Berrichon belongs to the past. Even if participants had positive views regarding Berrichon, it seems to not be enough for them to keep using it.

Conclusion

Berrichon’s current situation (i.e., in rapid decline) reflects the reality of regional languages in France. This decline is mostly due to the growing importance and dominance of Standard French.

The study at the center of this paper aimed at investigating some current language practices and perceptions of Berrichon in a small sample of participants to better understand some points of view that exist around Berrichon. The responses collected for this study showed that most participants are not fluent in Berrichon and consider Berrichon to be endangered. More specifically, it is perceived that Berrichon will disappear in the foreseeable future. At the same time, many participants agreed that Berrichon was a strong part of the local culture and preserving it was rather important. The idea of local culture appeared strong in some answers and shows how, even though Berrichon is disappearing, the language is not necessarily seen negatively but represents a strong part of the culture of the Berry area. Furthermore, the idea of preservation was strongly associated with the cultural aspect of Berrichon, showing that participants expressed some interest in the preservation of the language, even if they did not use it frequently or at all.

While this provides us with information on the current linguistic situation of Berrichon, more research needs to be done to fully understand it. For example, there is a lack of data on the current number of speakers, and we need to gather more information on language transmission if it still happening. Further research could take the form of interviews with members of the linguistic community to gather more qualitative data regarding the perceptions of the language, and what Berrichon means to community members in the Berry area.

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