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The Rhetoric of Revolution: the Indispensable Role of Language in the French Struggle for Liberty and Equality

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By

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Abstract of the Thesis

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This paper examines the external and internal changes that occurred in the French language as a result of the French Revolution. In terms of external changes, it examines the perception and overall regulation of the language that resulted directly from the social and political upheaval of French society in the late eighteenth century. While most external changes that were attempted did not come to fruition during the Revolution itself, many aspects of the French language in the early twenty-first century can trace their heritage back to the ideals of the movement. Internally, changes were manifested primarily in the lexicon of French, which are examined in the context of two fiery discourses that were delivered at critical junctures of the Revolution. Taken together, the external and internal changes that occurred during the eighteenth century continue to influence the French language and form an indispensable component of the French national identity.

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Christopher Reimels

Thesis

Introduction

Languages are an indispensable component of the human experience. The utilization of language as a means of communication most likely began when primitive human beings realized that they had a unique ability and even a necessity to communicate verbally with others. Of course, language has always been a means of satisfying a basic desire to connect with others and to achieve a sense of belonging to a certain group or society. Through the ages people naturally and quite spontaneously formed languages, primarily by way of oral communication. It is thus very natural that such languages became major building blocks of human civilization. Languages provide a conduit for human thought, which has defined and guided the various cultures of humankind through the course of history. A cursory glance at the daily functioning of any civilization, past or present, will immediately reveal the primacy of its given language. Even such rudimentary tasks as reading a newspaper, listening to a news report, or communicating with family members require the working knowledge of at least one language.

Given its indispensable nature, then, it is often the case that a language becomes much more than a simple means of communication. A language often becomes an intrinsic element of a personal or

cultural identity, a way in which an individual can identify with a group and conversely the way in which a group can identify with an individual. Human relations are all effected in some way by languages, from basic interpersonal relationships to those between the leader of an empire and his people. For example, the mighty Roman Empire came to dominate much of the western world and thus brought the Latin language to a status of prominence that lasted for centuries. Such hegemony would not have been nearly as possible without a common language through which to communicate. In fact, Latin was indeed so impactful that its significance has transcended several centuries. Furthermore, it continues to influence speakers of the Romance Languages, which are all derivatives of Latin. The Romance Languages include Spanish, Italian, French, Portuguese, and Romanian.

The fact that the Romance Languages descended from Latin facilitates the introduction of the next critical aspect of any language: its proclivity toward change. It is inevitable that over time languages will exhibit a certain degree of change. Such changes can be manifested either externally or internally. An external change involves the way in which a language is perceived or even judged by society. The example of how the Roman Empire raised the status of Latin and utilized it in order to expand its power would be an example of an external change. It involved a perception and a judgment regarding the Latin language. An external change is also one that occurs outside of the language itself. It will usually involve the status of a language rather than its substance. For example, if French were to be adopted as the official language of a nation, such a change would be considered external, for it would alter the status of the language and would not necessarily require any grammatical or lexical changes to the language itself. A change in the grammar or vocabulary of a language would be considered internal, for such modifications alter the language itself. Tracing the internal history of a language can be difficult, as it is often nearly impossible to be certain of how a language was spoken in previous generations.

Therefore, the study of a language as it was used during many historical periods is left largely to the consultation of historical records. For example, in an attempt to understand the languages of the Ancients, scholars have scrutinized an abundance of texts, such as the comedies of Plato, down to the slightest orthographical details(Alatorre, 57). Such studies can reveal a significant amount about the structure and function of a given language, particularly in terms of how it evolved into its present form.

In studying the origins of French, it has been determined that French is a descendant of Vulgar Latin, which was a descendant of Classical Latin. It can thus be said that French traces its roots to Classical Latin. French did not, however, evolve directly from Classical Latin. The earliest remains of Latin can be traced to the sixth century B.C., while Roman literature did not begin in earnest until the third century B.C.(Bennet, 4). Over a period of centuries, Classical Latin evolved into Vulgar Latin, which then gradually became French. The term Vulgar Latin refers to the fact that it was the variety or dialect of Latin that over time had gained favor with the “people,” or those who actually spoke the language. It is important to note that, in this context, the term was not in any way associated with a profane expression. It simply referred to a variety of the language that over time had come to be accepted by the people who spoke it. Acceptance and more importantly usage are the two essential factors in the survival of any dialect of a language. This tendency is not unique to Latin or French, as the variety of a spoken language that survives in any given society is that which has the privilege of being spoken by the people.

The evolution of a language, however, can be rather complicated and implies a great deal of internal change, or change that occurs within the language itself. The French language will be considered as an example. French is spoken by millions of people around the world. For example, it currently maintains a significant presence in Europe, North America, and Africa. Since the language is widely spoken on at least three continents, it naturally exhibits a plentitude of dialects. For example,

Parisian French can differ significantly from that of Quebec, the latter often being referred to as *Québécois*. For example, in France the expression *faire des courses* means to do the shopping. In *Québécois*, the verb “*magasiner*” is used. It must be realized that any dialect of any given language is the product of an ongoing process of change that can be traced back many centuries, and each dialect has its own unique story. This will be inevitably underscored by variance between dialects that are in a general sense considered to be the same language. Each generation of speakers contributes to the process of modifying their local dialect, until eventually the dialect has changed so greatly that it is virtually unrecognizable to that of past generations.

It is important to note two crucial issues. First, there are many dialects associated with any given language, and they often evolve individually. It is therefore virtually impossible to speak of French as having only one dialect. *Québécois*, with its differences from Parisian French, serves as a prime example of this concept. Secondly, the process of internal change never actually ceases. For example, there is currently some concern that the French language is adopting too many *anglicismes*, or words that are similar or identical to English words. Examples of this trend are *le weekend*, *le sport*, and *le jogging*, which have all gained a level of acceptance in the French lexicon such that they are taught in most standardized instructional texts (Fischer, 190). These terms are clearly borrowings from English. The merits of such terms are not nearly as relevant as the fact that they exemplify some of the lexical changes that have taken place fairly recently within the language.

To take a more extreme example from history that would have an enormous impact on the formation of French, Classical Latin was a highly inflected language. This means that nouns, adjectives, and pronouns took inflectional endings in order to convey meaning. There were six grammatical cases that would require different endings in order to reflect such differences in meaning: nominative, accusative, dative, genitive, ablative, and locative. The nominative case was used to denote the subject

of a verb. In the Latin utterance *Puer est magnus*, or the boy is large, the word *puer* would be in the nominative case because it denotes the subject of the verb *est*. The nominative is usually considered the point of reference in forming the other five cases. The accusative case was used to denote the direct object of the verb. In the sentence *ego puerum video*, or I see the boy, the word *puer* must become *puerum* to indicate that it is now the direct object of the verb *video*. Classical Latin used the dative case to denote the indirect object of a verb. For example, in the sentence *puella puero donum dat*, or the girl is giving the boy a gift, *puero* indicates that the boy is receiving the direct object of the verb *dat* (Wheelock, 25). Of course, the word *donum* is in the accusative, since it is in this case the direct object of the verb. The ablative was used to modify or limit the means of the verb. The utterance *cum puero* means with the boy. The genitive case was used to denote possession. In the sentence *liber pueri est magnus*, or the boy's book is great, *puero* indicates that it is the boy who is the possessor. Over the course of many centuries the genitive was abandoned in favor of the preposition *de*. For example, *le livre de la fille*, or the girl's book. Finally, the vocative case was used to call out to someone directly. For example, *o puer, serva me*, meaning o boy, save me.

It is interesting that French as it is spoken today contains almost no resemblance to its language of origin in terms of nominal inflection. While individual words do in fact resemble modern French words, the inflectional or case endings are to a large extent no longer employed. For example, the Latin word *porta* (door) is virtually identical to the French word *porte*. However, in French the word *porte* does not take the inflectional endings of its ancestor, although it does of course show variance in the plural (*portes*). The primary reason for the reduction in inflectional endings is that gradually the people who spoke the language modified it in favor of simplicity. This tendency is quite common, as people usually prefer to simplify the language that they use in their daily communications. Gradually, in making the long linguistic journey from Latin to French, inflectional endings were replaced by specialized prepositions (such as *à, de, chez*) and a rigid word order. In terms of syntax, over a period of centuries

French came to adopt the syntactical model Subject-Verb-Object,(SVO) as opposed to the traditional Subject-Object-Verb(SOV) order of Classical Latin. Also, as nouns drew their meanings from case endings, word order in Classical Latin was not as rigid. It was the inflectional endings instead of word order that indicated the meaning of an utterance. Modern French, however, has come to rely very heavily on the syntactical order of Subject-Verb-Object(SVO).

The lack of inflection of modern French restricts flexibility in terms of syntactical order. In the French sentence *je vois la fille*, the word *fille*, or the direct object, must be in the nuclear, or terminal position of the utterance. An alternate word order, such as **je la fille vois*, in which the noun *fille* is in pre-nuclear position, is somewhat confusing and universally unacceptable. However, the same utterance in Classical Latin would be quite satisfactory, as it would not be shackled with the same restrictions of word order. To consider an example, the sentence 'the boy gives the girl a rose' can be expressed in Latin in many ways. *Puer puellae rosam dat* is one option. This model shows the typical Latin word order Subject-Object-Verb.(SOV) It is also possible to express the same idea as *puellae rosam dat puer*. While this word order would seem quite strange to speakers of any of the Romance Languages today, speakers of Latin would have found it quite acceptable. This is of course because the inflectional endings on each word indicate its meaning, regardless of its order of appearance in the sentence. Today, one has to leave the realm of the Romance languages in order to find such elaborate inflectional systems that have survived. For example, German and to a larger extent Russian are languages that maintain extensive inflectional systems.

To this point, languages have been considered from an external and an internal point of view. External factors would include the status of the Latin language during the Roman Empire. A simpler example would be a family choosing a particular language in which to communicate. Both examples represent external factors because they primarily involve the perception and ultimate acceptance of a

language as standard. The only variant is the group of speakers in question. External changes affect the society of a given language, but do not necessarily mandate changes to the language itself. Internal factors include the above example of the gradual linguistic journey from Classical Latin to modern French. The key aspect to internal language changes is that they occur within the language itself. Externally, a language can be evaluated in terms of how it is perceived by its speakers, who collectively constitute a society.

A modern example of an external language factor would be the importance of the French language to its native speakers, wherever they may be in the world. In France, the language is given a great deal of prestige and is an integral part of the French national identity. The language is also considered an indispensable aspect of many Francophone cultures. Québec serves an example. Since the arrival of Jacques Cartier in 1534, French has had a continuous presence in North America. Following the Seven Years War (1756-1763), in which the French and their Native American allies were defeated by the British, the French population that remained in North America was granted the right to continue speaking their native tongue through the Quebec Act in 1774. This legislation allowed French Canadians the freedom to continue practicing Catholicism while maintaining the French form of civil law. In allowing the people of Canada to continue speaking French, the British perhaps altered the history of the language in North America. Their decision thus constituted a sort of external language change. They were clearly not interested in changing the French language itself. Following the passage of the Quebec Act, French Canadians would assume the burden of ensuring the survival of French in the New World. This determination to maintain the status of French in Canada has continued for over two centuries, particularly through their writing. Such writing can be very strident, which is an indicator of the importance of their language. In fact, French Canadian literature will undoubtedly long continue to be militant in order to express the soul of a people determined to survive in French(Hirsch, 274). All of

the above are external language factors in that they involve the perception, acceptance, and ultimate survival of French in North America.

Aside from its cultural importance, the French language is often perceived to be just as rigidly structured as it is mysteriously beautiful. In fact, French is often viewed as having been codified to the point of being “institutionalized.” Here, according to Nadeau, an institution can represent anything that has been set up or established (Nadeau, 10). According to Nadeau’s definition, examples of institutions can be schools, governmental organizations, or even the ideals of a political manifesto. The French language itself can be considered an institution, since it has official status in France and has clearly definable regulations of grammar and vocabulary. It is an established element of the French national identity. A trip to a local bookstore will clearly reveal that French has been rigidly codified, as various books by different authors propose essentially the same concepts in terms of grammar, spelling, and syntax. The same philosophy can be found in many Spanish-speaking countries of Central and South America. Many of these people have a strong sense of pride in their variety of Spanish. It can be noticed, however, that just as in the example of French, it is impossible to speak of one variety of the Spanish language that is pure or superior to the others. This speaks to the universality of language variance. A language can also gain “official” status and it can to an extent be made mandatory by a government. Although a language may gain official status, even by the most powerful nation on Earth, it will never fully eradicate regional dialects. The most common situation is one in which the “standard” dialect coexists with regional varieties. As people will always develop very localized dialects, such a situation is in fact inevitable.

Internal aspects of a language are of course somewhat different than external ones. Internal changes can occur within a generation or two, and they will collectively modify a language over time. An example may be found in the gradual eradication of the case system in the evolution of French from

Classical Latin. Small changes occurred each generation, and eventually over a period of several centuries a new language was discernible. More remarkable internal language changes can also occur more rapidly, and usually involve the lexicon. Internal changes do not, however, require any modifications in an external sense. For example, if the French people were slowly to gravitate back to the inflectional system of Classical Latin, such an internal change would not necessarily affect the status of the language in France. To illustrate this point in terms of a modern example, the French Academy has the special authority to make decisions regarding the proper usage of the French language. This means they are given the unique ability to determine what is proper in terms of the language and its grammar. Thus they can modify many aspects of the French language, to include syntax and the lexicon. If they were to accept a group of terms into the French lexicon in a given year, this would not necessarily reflect a change in the status of the language in France. There are, however, times at which both types of changes do occur at the same time.

Chapter 1

The French Revolution, occurring between 1789 and 1799, was a time of chaos and unprecedented change in which virtually every aspect of French society under the Ancien Régime was either modified or eradicated. The History Channel has called the French Revolution the most significant event in the history of Western Civilization, as it changed nearly every aspect of life in France (History Channel, The French Revolution). King Louis XVI would be dethroned and beheaded, the Catholic Church would lose its position of privilege, and the Third Estate would finally gain a significant voice in the form of a representative body. The French language would play a critical role in such cultural changes, and would in fact serve as the medium for this newly acquired voice of the people. Given that the government and the language were changing so quickly, the interplay of external and internal

language changes was evident. It was for this reason that the Revolution set such a linguistic precedent. Externally, vast change was attempted by the newly-proclaimed National Assembly. Examples were the standardization of French, the establishment of a unified educational system, and the eradication of dialects that did not conform to the “standard” Parisian variety. Such modifications were deemed immediately necessary as the hastily-formed new government had to bring linguistic unity very quickly to a very divided country. While the language did provide a means of communicating the message of the Revolution as well as a certain sense of unity among the French people, it did not fully achieve all of its goals in terms of external language changes, at least not during the Revolution itself.

Internally, changes were most evident in terms of the French lexicon. Many terms that had existed before the Revolution saw their meanings drastically and permanently redefined. This trend was most clearly exhibited throughout the Revolution in the form of political speeches delivered by a fierce group of gifted orators. This paper will consider two speeches, one by Louis Antoine de Saint Just in November 1792 prior to the execution of King Louis XVI in January 1793, and another by Maximilien Robespierre in February 1794, in which he justified the Terror that has become synonymous with the Revolution. The speeches represent both significant historical moments in terms of the advancement of the Revolution as well as a rapidly changing French lexicon. They thus represent the unique interplay of external and internal language changes that guided the French Revolution. Lastly, the interplay of external and internal changes to the French language altered the course of the Revolution and permanently changed the language by inventing new vocabulary terms that are so firmly entrenched in the French lexicon today. Many of the terms have survived two centuries and currently remain a part of the French lexicon. Examples to be considered are *Jacobin* and *guillotine*, two terms that would earn both a place in the French dictionary as well as in the French psyche. The interplay is evident in that in creating new vocabulary terms, they also altered the perception of the French language and nation.

The French Revolution is an example from history in which a new political and social reality drastically altered the French language as well as the French national identity. It would be extremely difficult to find an example either before or since that could parallel the Revolution. Words like *patrie*, *liberté*, and *égalité* came to symbolize the French people, whereas prior to the Revolution they had very little significance outside of their abstract denotative meanings. This fact would be difficult to imagine today, as these terms have remained cornerstones of the French psyche for centuries due to the impact of the Revolution. Prior to 1789, *égalité* was not a very significant term. It certainly did not represent much in terms of actually being considered of equal social status with others. The French feudal system would never have allowed such a luxury. After 1789, however, it became one of the most integral aspects of a new France that was to be directed by the will of the leaders of the Third Estate, who had taken control of the French government in June 1789 in order to enact the will of the people. Today the term *égalité* is so significant that it is included in the national motto of France: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. Each term in the motto illustrates both kinds of change. There is the change in the perception of the term, which is external, followed by the change in the definition of the word itself, which is internal. This phenomenon seemed to be an everyday occurrence in France during the Revolution. In 1789, at the moment that the National Assembly declared itself to be the voice of the people, it was immediately faced with a daunting task. It had to communicate the unified message of the Revolution to the newly-declared "French people." This would necessitate not only changes to the language itself internally, but also externally to the government's and the people's approach to the language. Taken together, the external and internal changes in the language were of course the reflection of a popular movement that would uproot virtually every aspect of French culture and forever alter the history of Western Civilization. Although the efficacy of external and internal changes was met with varying degrees of success during the Revolution, they did forever alter the destiny of the French people and their national identity.

The French language has the perception of being a very well-established language, one that has for centuries remained indispensable in terms of international affairs. The language has roughly 110 million speakers who claim to be natives, while another 190 million claim French as their second language. French has been the official language of France since 1992 under the current régime. The language had also been declared official several times, beginning with the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts in 1539. The French are as a group justifiably proud of the fact that virtually all official and unofficial business in France is conducted in French. While one might logically assume that this unique relationship between the people and its language has always existed, a cursory glance at the linguistic situation in France prior to the outbreak of the Revolution would in fact reflect a contradictory reality. Upon declaring itself the representative body of the French people, the enormous task of communicating the unified message of the Revolution to an ethnically and linguistically diverse people seemed insurmountable.

Of crucial importance was that in 1789, France, the largest and most populous kingdom in Europe, presented a rich variety of cultures and languages. In 1790, the National Assembly put Father Henri Grégoire in charge of an unprecedented national language survey. Prior to being able to communicate a message to the French people, it was essential to know exactly which languages they were speaking and where. Abbé Grégoire was a priest who was highly sympathetic to the ideals of the French Revolution and was incredibly meticulous about his work. He began on 13 August 1790 and completed his task admirably by 1794. The survey consisted of 43 questions that were primarily concerned with the status of the French language as well as the presence of *patois*, or localized dialects, in all the municipalities of France. He inquired about language usage in important venues like the Church. He attempted to determine how languages were used by people who lived in small towns. He wanted to know how the spoken languages compared to the written ones, and if there were any available texts that could be used as references for possible translations into the Parisian dialect.

Grégoire did, like many of his colleagues, realize from the beginning that standardization would probably be the final decision of the National Assembly. The survey was completed in 1794. Grégoire received only 49 responses, each of which reflected great linguistic differences. Many of his inquiries were not answered at all. The results would not be very conducive to the linguistic objectives of the Revolution, as France had over many centuries developed an extremely complex linguistic landscape.

There were about twenty-eight million people living in France in 1790. According to the survey conducted by Father Grégoire, only three million people were determined to be highly proficient in French, which at that time referred to the Parisian dialect. He quickly reasoned that of those three million, there would be a certain number that had varying degrees of reading deficiencies. Another six million were found to be conversant. This group seemed promising in that it at least had a remote chance of being reached without substantial difficulties. The next two figures were perhaps the most alarming. Thirteen million people had an extremely weak command of the language, while, perhaps most troubling, there were six million people that did not speak French at all. He discovered that Italian had a strong presence in the Alps, while German was common in eastern borderlands such as Alsace. Even more discouraging was the fact that Italian and German were even being used in many places in an official capacity. It had to have been quite shocking and troubling to the authorities in Paris that only three million people spoke their dialect. The results of Father Gregoire's survey indicated that the situation was clearly much worse than anyone had imagined.

In 1790, France was a nation of about 28 million people. In addition, there were more than thirty dialects of French that were being spoken, many of which were so different from the Parisian dialect that they could have actually been considered separate languages in themselves. It was, of course, the Parisian dialect that was espoused by the revolutionary leaders and was therefore naturally chosen to represent all of France. It was in fact members of the bourgeoisie who had taken control of

the French government, and therefore were able to impose their will in virtually all aspects of French life. This was primarily because the region known as *Île de France*, the department in which Paris is currently located, had accumulated power progressively over the course of many centuries. This would be problematic in terms of the linguistic objective of the National Assembly, since only about 3 million people actually spoke the Parisian variety. Although vibrant and viewed by many as the philosophical and cultural capital of the world, Paris in 1789 had a population of only about 700,000. In fact, only twenty percent of the French people actually lived in urban areas at all. This was particularly discouraging to linguistic unity, as regional dialects were known to reflect the largest degree of variance in rural areas. The grim reality was that the revolutionaries were linguistically isolated from approximately ninety percent of their people. It was quite a precarious situation for a government that considered linguistic unity as a primary goal.

Faced with such harsh circumstances, the government had to act quickly and decisively. Its initial decision might have seemed surprising to some. The National Assembly decided to translate their new laws and decrees into every existing language variety in France. Many delegates in the National Assembly were firmly suggesting this possibility to the Assembly in January 1790, before Father Gregoire had even begun his work. Their decision seemed logical upon receiving Father Grégoire's results, since only fifteen departments with three million people, were identified as purely French speaking (McPhee, 65). Such a policy was certainly justifiable in terms of the values of the Revolution, which sought above all to champion liberty and equality. In November 1792, just two months after King Louis XVI had been dethroned, a special commission was established to accelerate the process. Translation centers were established in French cities such as Paris, Bretagne, Alsace, and Lorraine. Although mass translation did not seem to make sense in light of the results of Father Gregoire's survey, it did seem like a wise and most of all fair choice when viewed through the lens of the ideals of the Revolution. After all, freedom of speech was considered by most, including the leaders of the National

Assembly to be a natural extension of the term liberty. Such natural liberties had been clearly spelled out in the text of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. By this standard, all of the dialects and languages being spoken in France should have had a right to exist. While this principle does lend some legitimacy to the idea of mass translation, its moral value contributed virtually nothing to its feasibility.

The endeavor to translate new laws into every identifiable dialect was utterly impossible and was really destined to fail before it even began. First, many of the local varieties of French did not even have any publications that clearly established their rules of grammar. In addition, the lexicon of each dialect was often quite different. A considerable amount of grammars that did have such texts were at best inconsistent. In fact, many regional languages did not have clear rules, grammar, or a defined vocabulary(Nadeau, 141). Worse, there were several dialects that were so different from Parisian French that they could have been considered separate languages. Even if there had been such texts, the National Assembly had neither the personnel nor the time to achieve such a task. They would have had to translate voluminously, all while facing the incredible task of mounting an insurrection against their monarch. In addition, following the execution of King Louis XVI In January 1793, they would have to confront the imminent danger of invasion from a coalition of European powers that did not look favorably on the French struggle. Even if the new French government were to overcome such formidable obstacles, there remained the imminent threat of civil war with counterrevolutionaries. Confronted by these desperate realities, the National Assembly made one of the most important decisions in terms of the external development of the French language. It would establish a national “standard” dialect of French in order to facilitate communication and provide for the effective dissemination of their message, which they considered to be as noble as it was universal.

This decision constitutes a major change in the history of the French language from an external point of view. The variety of the revolutionaries, or that of the area around Paris, would naturally become the template to which all other dialects would be expected to conform. While the use of the language did bring a considerable amount of unity to the effort, the linguistic goals of the Assembly were far too ambitious and even a bit pompous. The leaders in the National Assembly felt that they had the right to make all decisions on the basis that they always had in mind the best interest of the “people.” The truth is that they were mainly bourgeoisie from the upper echelon of the Third Estate. They tended to be either aristocrats like Lafayette and Mirabeau, scientists like the astronomer Bailly or the physician turned journalist Marat, or inevitably, lawyers like Danton and Robespierre (Jenkins, 107). Like most, they had very personal agendas that were not always helpful to the common citizen that they claimed to represent. For example, Maximilian Robespierre, once so true to the ideals of the Revolution that he was known as “the Incorruptible”, had the reputation of loving the “people”, but only in the abstract sense of the word. He loved the idea of loving the people. He was certainly more skilled in communicating such a message than he was in actually putting it into practice. This occurrence would establish a disturbing trend in terms of the rest of the Revolution. Its leaders would often sacrifice their cherished ideals in order to pursue a more immediate objective. This tendency would manifest itself in the quest to standardize the French language, as it was promptly determined that all other languages were obstacles to the Revolution. Such language varieties came to be known pejoratively as *patois*.

Although not formally defined in linguistics, in France the term *patois* has traditionally referred to any language, even a variety of French, that is considered to be substandard or even inferior. Henriette Walter agrees in observing that “unfortunately, the term *patois* has become synonymous in people’s minds with the all too frequently repeated idea of a rudimentary form of speech, with some people going as far as to say that it isn’t a language” (Walter, 2). Of course, the idea of an inferior form of speech is very flawed, especially in terms of modern linguistics. This is because a *patois* is simply a

variety of a language. Even the Parisian dialect of French was merely a patois of Vulgar Latin that came to dominate the rest of France due to economic and administrative advantages.(Walter, 3) . The term *patois* comes from a term in Old French that means, “incomprehensible speech” or “rude language.” Beyond this the origin of the term *patois* remains somewhat of an enigma to linguists. A popular theory is that it descends from the Latin term PATRIA, or homeland. In this case, a *patois* came to represent a dialect of a language that was used by isolated communities that generally lived in small rural areas. This would certainly parallel the situation in France at the outbreak of the Revolution, as small rural communities often derived their identities from their communal dialects and customs.

The modern definition of a *patois*, at least from the perspective of modern linguistics, is quite different than that of the French Revolution. First, it is important that any definition of a *patois* not contain any qualitative references at all. A *patois* simply refers to a localized variety or dialect of a given language. It can thus be said that the standard dialect of Paris, despite all its influence, was simply a *patois* that gained a social and economical advantage. Regional dialects were particularly common in France in 1790, since it was primarily a rural kingdom. It was composed of scores of isolated rural communities that did not communicate very often with each other. This isolation was naturally accompanied by differences in languages. For example, it was quite common for people in Gabian near the Mediterranean Sea not to be able to understand the people of Menucourt to the North of Paris(McPhee, 5). These differences can be taken a step farther, as language is often used to create a certain level of class discrimination. It has happened in virtually every culture throughout history, and France of the late 18th century was no exception.

Even the bourgeoisie leaders of the National Assembly, beacons of freedom and equality in their own eyes, were somewhat guilty of linguistic discrimination. They assumed that since they were providing the intellectual and ideological fuel for the Revolution, their dialect should inevitably prevail.

Paris had, after all, enjoyed a status of privilege since the Middle Ages. In time, Paris, having become the strongest economic and administrative power, came to bully others (Walter, 4). Prior to the Revolution, a *patois* could have been anything that was unintelligible to King Louis XVI and the Royal Court, or any variety that did not conform to the spoken language of Paris or Versailles, where the Court was actually housed prior to the Women's March in October 1789. The existence of *patois* would not have been as serious to King Louis XVI, since his power was based more on blind obedience than it was on linguistic unity. Immediately following the outbreak of the Revolution in June 1789, the definition was immediately modified, as a *patois* would have come to mean anything that was unintelligible to the members of the newly-proclaimed National Assembly. In the frenzied paranoia of the times, it did not take much to become branded as a speaker of *patois*. These languages, along with the people who spoke them, would quickly come to be regarded as threats to the Revolution. Speakers of *patois* would ironically become victims of a violent and relentless Revolution that had begun with the primary objective of representing and protecting them.

In order to understand the difficulty that was encountered in attempting to standardize the French language during the Revolution, it is first essential to have at least a rudimentary understanding of the structure of French society under the *Ancien Régime* prior to the outbreak of the Revolution. It was, after all, the structure of French society and the policies of a nonchalant and inept king that had created so much linguistic disparity. France had been dominated by a feudal system since the Middle Ages. Thus, France was a very striated society that did not promise much to members of the lower echelon. Of course, at the pinnacle of French society was King Louis XVI, who ruled from 1774 until he was dethroned in September 1792. He would later set a precedent by being beheaded by his own people on January 21, 1793. The French monarch was essentially considered to be God on Earth. His decrees were in fact interpreted as divine, and therefore his power was never questioned. Below the King, France was divided into three Estates. The First Estate was comprised of the clergy. They

numbered about 130,000. It was thought that their prayers were essential to ensure the well-being of France. Their task was primarily to pray for their countrymen and more importantly for their king. Although they were clearly the smallest Estate, they were also the most privileged due to their intimate relationship with God. In the Second Estate were the Nobles, who numbered around 200,000. They were charged with the protection of their land and for that matter all of France. They owned about a third of the land in France and had at the very least feudal rights over the rest (Davies, 3). They were essentially the military muscle of French society, and therefore were rewarded with a high social status. The Third Estate was made up of the commoners, who actually represented about ninety-seven percent of the French people. They ranged from the very poor to the skilled shopkeepers and artisans. Of course, it was their extraordinary passion and zeal that would ultimately lead to the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789. The Third Estate represented ninety-seven percent of the population of France, while the other two Estates accounted for just three percent. Worse, when the Estates General was convened in 1789 prior to the Revolution, voting was conducted by class rather than by head. This policy ensured that the voice of the Third Estate would be silenced. They had thus grown very weary of being the most populous Estate in France, only to be completely dismissed and neglected by an exceedingly pompous and extravagant king.

Given the social structure of France prior to the Revolution in 1789, linguistic unity was not really essential to the function of society. All power and authority was vested in King Louis XVI, who ruled by means of unquestionable divine authority. As long as each Estate effectively performed its general responsibilities, discord was not a major issue. In reality, the king was not primarily concerned with which language his people were speaking, so long as they obeyed him. While he did find the idea of linguistic unity of his country interesting, he did little to remedy the situation. Given these circumstances, linguistically France naturally became a rich mixture of cultures that were represented by dozens of local dialects. Fraternization among members of the Estates was neither common nor

necessary, and it was not uncommon for people to live their entire lives within the confines of a very small rural community. This isolation naturally provided for a high degree of linguistic variance. For example, in 1789, it was probable that people in Paris and those living in Marseilles could not understand each other. The people of France were divided socially and linguistically, bound together very weakly by a blind faith in a despotic monarch who had very little concern for them. Under King Louis XVI, it is evident that the terms nation and language were completely separated. The French Revolution altered the history of the language when the terms language and nation were joined. The historical integration of the terms nation and language, as will be evidenced in the following section, would permanently redefine the relationship between the people and the French language.

In discussing the external changes that were attempted following the decision of the National Assembly to standardize the French language, it is helpful to remember that the Revolution itself can be divided into phases. The first phase, from 1789-1792, can be considered the most moderate period. King Louis XVI maintained a certain level of influence in the new government. For example, on 11 September 1789, he was granted a suspensive veto, which meant that he could at least stall legislation (Davies, 33). In September 1792, the National Convention, the new French government, assembled for the first time in Paris. It immediately became apparent that much had changed. One of the first acts of the Convention was to declare the monarchy abolished, which was followed by the proclamation that 22 September 1792 was to mark the first day of Year I of the French Republic (Hibbert, 180). This date was clearly significant in that it was to mark the birth of a new nation as well as a departure from the policies of the original revolutionary government. In 1789, the National Assembly endeavored to express the will of the people via a representative body, but they intended to do so within the framework of a constitutional monarchy. These more moderate policies were quickly abandoned by the National Convention in favor of extremism. There are several interpretations of the point at which the Revolution is considered to have turned extreme. It is possible to cite the decision to

put King Louis XVI on trial for his years of neglect and incompetence. The misfortunes of the French people had progressively worsened during his reign. The most likely turning point, however, was the actual beheading of the King, which took place on January 21, 1793. This historic occasion was at least the point of no return for the French Revolution, as the people had boldly decapitated their divine ruler and thereby eliminated any possible return to normalcy as they had previously understood it. The execution of the King was also the point at which other European monarchs such as Austria's and Prussia's decided to intervene militarily. Either way, the Terror phase of the Revolution is generally accepted to have occurred over a period of roughly two years, (1793-1794) during which the Revolution was piloted to new extremes of violence and bloodshed. In Spring 1794, the Terror became so severe that it was known as the "Great Terror." At its worst, approximately 8,000 people were finding their way to the guillotine each month. The Terror finally ended on July 28, 1794, when its leader, Maximilien Robespierre, was himself was led to the national razor. A sort of order was restored In 1795, as the Directory was installed and began the slow process of rebuilding in the wake of the Revolution. The French language can be said to have made a similar journey that accurately reflected the historical period through which it passed. Many external language changes were attempted, and the seed of unity between language and nation were planted. Many of the alterations, while initially unsuccessful, would eventually cultivate a new relationship between the French nation and its language. Such modifications can be most readily detected in documents and decrees, educational reform, and war.

Upon taking the Tennis Court Oath on June 20, 1789, the National Assembly declared itself to be the new voice of the people and vowed to continue meeting until a new constitution had been established. They would achieve a great deal, including the abolition of the feudal system, suppression of the "old orders," establishment of civil equality among all men, and the suffrage of more than half the adult male population(Britannica Academic Online). Women were unfortunately not considered while making such improvements. Their first accomplishment, however, was not a constitution but the

Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. This document, influenced greatly by the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, was accepted on 26 August 1789. It was a summary of the personal freedoms that were to be afforded to all citizens. It was actually a quickly assembled list of basic liberties that were considered by the revolutionaries to be just as foundational as they were nonnegotiable. "While the document succeeded in establishing some general principles, it was not a constitution but a 'holding operation' of sorts, as it contained significant promises and gave the literate classes something to look to"(Davies, 50). As this quote suggests, there was a new advantage to be gained by being able to read the Parisian dialect of French. People from virtually every part of France wanted to learn the dialect so that they would be able to understand the decisions that would so profoundly affect their lives. They understandably did not want to miss such a rare opportunity. Since liberty and equality were being openly discussed, the Parisian dialect came to symbolize the hope and promise of a brighter future.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of The Citizen does not mention the French language directly, but in article eleven it mentions language at least indirectly. It says, "The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses as shall be defined by law." This statement accomplishes two objectives. First, it assures the citizen of the unprecedented right to express himself as he chooses. In terms of language usage, the clause should have meant that the people had the right to continue speaking all of the varieties of *patois* that existed in France. The second part of the clause, however, reserves a substantial amount of authority for the National Assembly. It essentially says that the Assembly will establish all laws pertaining to speech, and that the citizenry is bound by all such legislation. While people did have the newfound right to express themselves freely, it also gave the government the right to modify it at their discretion. It really gave the National Assembly the right to negate the freedom of speech. Such a right was being granted on a

provisional and even fragile basis. This indirectly sanctions the linguistic aspect of the Terror that would later be carried out in order to establish a unique national dialect of French. As in all aspects of French life, the National Assembly saw it as their right to impose its linguistic standards on the masses.

Given the ideological intensity and rhetorical fury of the French Revolution, its leaders seemed to increase their efforts frequently. This phenomenon was naturally extended to the language policy of the Revolution. In 1792, the standardization of French was considered essential, but it was seen as a process and thus was approached with a certain amount of patience. This was of course during the more moderate or constitutional monarchy stage of the Revolution. This moderation is evidenced by the fact that by January 1790, the National Assembly was in the process of attempting to translate their work into every known dialect. This was, of course, before the arrival of the results of Father Grégoire. It was not until April 1793, arguably the dawn of the Terror, that deputy Bertrand Barere made a strong statement to the Convention in favor of a national dialect. He said: "the monarchy had its reasons for resembling the Tower of Babel. In a democracy, to leave the people ignorant of the national language and therefore incapable of being in power is tantamount to a betrayal of the fatherland. Among a free people, the language must be one and the same for all."

In making such a comment, Barere was in effect summarizing the journey of the French language in terms of external changes. The Tower of Babel is certainly an apt description of the language situation under the *Ancien Régime*, as there were dozens of mutually unintelligible dialects being spoken in France. In the second part of his quote, he claimed that the lack of a national dialect would plunge a large portion of the country into ignorance. If there was too much linguistic divisiveness, the people would remain weak. It was only through linguistic unity that all citizens would be guaranteed an understanding and a voice in the administration of their government. If the people were to have no voice, then the ideals of the *patrie* would be futile. Barere saw linguistic unity as essential to the well-

being of the individual as well as to that of the state. The two were to benefit equally from such a situation, and France would prosper. The final part of this quote is the direction that the Revolution would take, a decision that would echo through the ages and affect generations of French speakers. Barere felt that if freedom and equality were really to establish a foothold in France, the people would have to unite in the adoption of one national language.

By January of 1794, France was fully engulfed in the Terror, which would come to be seen as the most radical phase of the French Revolution. Maximilien Robespierre and his radical Jacobins were essentially ruling France through the iron fist of the Committee of Public Safety. The Committee of Public Safety was created in 1793 by the National Convention to restore order following the execution of King Louis XVI. That same year, the Academy of Science, which had been established in 1666, was suspended. The French Academy, which had been founded in 1635 by Cardinal Richieu as a guardian of the French language, was also closed. Worse, by summer 1793, the guillotine, exile, and death by natural causes had decreased the number of Academy members from 40 to 17 (Nadeau, 145). In fact, in an official decree issued in 1793, all Academies and literary societies were suspended on the suspicion of being "royalist". While the French Academy did have the support of the King, it also was guided by the ideas of the *philosophes*. Such closures were the reflection of an exaggerated sense of paranoia. By the end of 1793, Robespierre and his Jacobins had taken control of the linguistic situation of France, and were ready to guide the linguistic aspect of the Revolution to new extremes.

The generation of such paranoia was a personal specialty of Maximilien Robespierre, who eventually extended such fear into virtually every aspect of life in France. The year 1794 was quite devastating, as there was not anyone or anything that remained out of reach for the Terror. This brief yet significant period became known as the "Great Terror." Robespierre, like most of his Jacobin colleagues, believed that the Terror should be applied to the French language. On July 20, 1794, he

delivered a speech in which he suggested methods of implementing the linguistic aspect of the Terror. First, he mandated that all public documents be published exclusively in French. Next, he made it a crime for public servants to speak any language other than French in an official context. Violators faced up to six months in prison, dismissal, and possible deportation. This was quite an unreasonable sentence for someone who merely dared to speak a language other than French. These decrees were never actually implemented, as Robespierre himself was led to the guillotine on 28 July 1794, effectively ending the Terror. Similar decrees were drafted after his death, but none ever gained any measurable degree of success. While the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen succeeded in establishing a blueprint for a free society, the majority of the decrees of the National Assembly and later the National Convention were not highly successful in bringing about external language changes, at least when measured in terms of the Revolutionary generation itself.

From the outset of the French Revolution, the National Assembly reasoned that one of the most effective ways to promote change was through the youth of France. This naturally involved making drastic changes in the French educational system. To this end, the Committee of Public Instruction was founded in order to ensure that all children receive a strong grounding in standardized French. The French language was one of the most integral components of the envisioned educational reforms. One does not need to look far to discover the primacy of education, as Article 1 of the French Constitution of 1792 clearly states that a primary objective of the Revolution was education. Also in 1792, deputy Francois Lanthenas, in establishing a new school system, presented to the Committee of Public Instruction a bill stating that French was to become in very little time the language of all students. It was also asserted in Article 4 of the same document that while French was to become the primary language of instruction, foreign languages such as German could continue to be used in towns with greater than 1500 people. This is clearly a reflection of a more moderate phase of the Revolution. While French was to be the primary language, there was also some leniency toward others. Until

September 1792, most revolutionaries were fairly moderate in that they were content with making their reforms within the framework of a constitutional monarchy. This indicates that although they were demanding recognition of their personal freedoms, they still maintained a certain level of respect for their King and his sacred position.

By early 1794, much had changed in terms of the Revolution. King Louis XVI had been guillotined the previous year, France was in a bitter war with a fierce coalition of European powers, and dissenters of the Revolution were being pursued and executed as part of an unprecedented period of bloodshed known to history as the Terror. The language policy as regards the educational system was granted no exception to these harsh realities. On 27 January 1794, a decree was issued that all instructors teach in French, with other languages being utilized only in auxiliary capacities. The window of tolerance toward other languages was closing. Also as part of the decree, Clause 4 of Article 2 states that spoken as well as written elements of French will be taught. At this advanced stage of the Revolution, the Convention felt strongly that the language had to become an “institution” of French society (Nadeau, 142). As Nadeau goes on to point out, the term institution may refer to anything that is firmly set up or established. Thus, the National Assembly, the monarchy, and particularly the French language came to be regarded as institutions. Of course, the language earned an increasing amount of attention as the Revolution progressed. In order to protect the French language as an institution, all regions were to send qualified individuals to Paris to be trained as instructors of French. The *École Normale* was established in Paris in order to train the prospective instructors. The term *Normale* was employed to indicate that the school would prepare individuals to teach “standardized” French. Such a designation suggested that there would be only one variety of the French language. Instructors were to spread the new language standard upon returning to their regions. The teachers were to become *instituteurs*, a term that, like many terms christened by the Revolution, persists to this day. Today, the term *instituteur* is used to identify an instructor in France’s primary education system.

Unfortunately, like many other external language changes of the period, educational reforms were to a large degree ineffective during the Revolution itself. Their efforts were hampered by many of the same obstacles faced by Father Grégoire in compiling his linguistic survey. In fact, many of the attempted external reforms were far less effective than the results of Father Gregoire's survey. It was actually Napoleon, who took control of the French government in his coup d'état in 1799, who created the French school system as it survives today. In fact, primary schooling that was free and compulsory for all children was not to be established in France until 1882(Hirsch, 115). Thus, it was nearly a century before the educational reforms of the National Assembly were realized. The achievement can in some way be seen as a delayed victory of the Revolution, as the seed for such an educational system had clearly been planted by the revolutionary government. The fact is that during the Revolution France was in no condition to formalize any external linguistic changes, particularly those that would affect an entire country that was being ravaged by war and harsh political strife. Hostilities were emerging everywhere, as proponents of the Revolution were constantly clashing with Royalists and other dissenters. Linguistic unity was further threatened by the fact that Royalists were most common in remote rural areas, where there also existed the most unique forms of *patois*. Their continued loyalty to the policies of the *Ancien Régime* coupled with their language differences strongly reinforced the erroneous idea that *patois* were somehow inferior to the dialect being spoken around Paris. There was thus a great deal of linguistic discrimination that emerged from these tumultuous circumstances. There was too much division and not enough time to bring about the desired changes.

In modern times, however, the existence and mission of the *École Normale Supérieure* can be interpreted as a delayed success of the external language changes sought by the French Revolution. While the goal of the *École Normale* was far too ambitious amidst the tumult of the 1790s, the original ideals of the revolutionaries are well represented by those of the current institution. The original mission of the *École Normale* was to train new teachers thoroughly in the philosophies of the

Enlightenment. This meant that teachers were to champion reason over superstition, and to grow in knowledge through highly practical disciplines such as the natural sciences. The instructors that it trained were to strive for the pinnacle of excellence in whatever they pursued. Of course, education was considered paramount in a philosophical society such as France. It was only natural that the integral philosophies of the Revolution, primarily that of the supremacy of reason, was to be instilled in future generations. It was the power of reason, after all, that had originally sparked the French Revolution. It was therefore of the utmost importance that these ideas be imparted to the youth of France.

The mission of the current institution has not changed much from how it was originally envisioned. On August 26, 1987, it was stated that “the Ecole normale superieure trains, through a cultural and scientific education of high level, students who intend to work in fundamental and applied research, teaching in the Universities or preparatory classes for the grandes écoles, as well as high school, and more generally, who intend to work in national administrations, public institutions, and enterprises”(École Superieur Website). Many of the educational goals of the Revolution are expressed in this quote. First of all, it is an institution in which education through reason is considered paramount. Teachers are thoroughly prepared in order to form the next generation, which was one of the most important objectives of the revolutionaries. Finally, the fact that many are prepared to work in “national administrations” and “public institutions” reflects a victory of the Revolution, as the leaders of the National Assembly and later the National Convention had endeavored feverishly to inspire such a strong sense of pride in the nation.

Graduates of the *École Normale Supérieure* have also upheld the spirit of the Revolution. They have done extremely well, going on to represent France as writers, philosophers, and statesmen. The school has produced twelve Nobel Prizes, ten Fields Medals, which is awarded every four years for

excellence in mathematics, and two John Bates Medals, which is awarded for excellence in economics. Located In Paris, in 2007 the school was rated the best university in Continental Europe. Each year, it maintains an elite rating as one of the finest schools on the continent . In the nineteenth century, two additional *Écoles Supérieures* were opened. The *École Supérieure* of Lyon stresses the sciences and humanities. The *École Supérieure* of Cachan is the most extensive, specializing in sociology, economics, pure and applied sciences, and the English language. It is quite apparent that while the idea of the *École Normale* did not exactly flourish during the Revolution, the current status of the school is a resounding fulfillment of their ambitious vision. It is thus clear that in many respects the well-respected French academic tradition can trace its roots back to the ideals of the Revolution.

France was also threatened by the possibility of war with an emerging coalition of European powers led by Prussia and Austria that was intent on destroying the Revolution and its republican ideals. While individual towns in France simply did not have enough people to send to pursue endeavors such as educational reform, they felt a strong sense of obligation to respond to a call to arms. Also, as compared to state-led standardization and educational reform, the French language was united more effectively through the threat of war, primarily with Austria. The threat of a foreign invasion tends to create a sense of urgency, as it is often a matter of life and death. Other external language changes, such as standardization and educational reform did not inspire the same level of commitment. From the start of the Revolution in 1789, the movement did not sit well with other European powers. This is quite understandable, as centuries of monarchial rule had come to form the societal bedrock of the European continent. If the French Revolution were to succeed, such republican ideas could spread to the whole continent. Undoubtedly with this possibility in mind, in August 1791, Prussia invited other European powers to join in restoring King Louis XVI to his rightful place as an absolute monarch. This pact, sealed by the Declaration of Pulnitz, failed primarily because of a mutual distrust among several European monarchs(Spielvogel, 584). Perhaps surprisingly, France took the initiative and actually declared war on

Austria on April 20, 1792. Reactionaries hoped that a preoccupation with war would extinguish the fires of the Revolution; French defeat, which seemed likely in view of the army's disintegration, might even lead to the restoration of the Old Regime. Leftists hoped that war would consolidate the Revolution at home while helping to spread their ideas to all of Europe(Spielvogel, 584).

In August 1793, facing a growing coalition of European powers, the Committee of Public Safety declared a universal mobilization. With a force of 1,169,000 by the end of 1794, the French army was the largest that Europe had ever seen. During the *levée en masse*, as it would become known to history, men were drafted from all over France in order to defend their country, which was affectionately being called *la patrie*, or "the fatherland." Inevitably, the regiments from all over France started moving toward a common language. It is important to note here, however, that such change occurred naturally as one group of people blended with another. This *levée en masse*, or mass levy, as it is known literally in English, marks the creation of modern nationalism(Spielvogel, 586). It was certain that the formation of such a large group from all over France would lead to changes in the languages of the soldiers. After the war, the soldiers would naturally return home with a somewhat different language. While the soldiers were forced to come together, their use of language was not forcibly controlled or altered. This is essentially the process by which people modify and ultimately create new languages. The unity of the French army would become a major force in the unification of the language. It would not, however, change completely during the generation of the Revolution. Such sweeping linguistic changes would eventually occur, but would certainly have to wait. The main issue was that the Revolution occurred over far too short a period of time to have effectuated the desired external changes. The French Revolutionary Wars, like many other external language factors, were significant in that they planted the seeds that would take generations to come to fruition.

The French Revolution draws its external historical significance from the fact that it attempted such a high degree of change so quickly. Parallel examples from history are extremely rare. In order to understand the linguistic significance of a language changing its role in a society so quickly, it may be helpful to look at a couple of examples of major societal changes that did not alter the use of a language quite as drastically. A worthy example is the American Revolution(1775-1783), which was also a significant popular movement that made considerable changes in the course of world history. Not coincidentally, it also served as an inspiration to many French commoners of the Third Estate who personally identified with the ideals of the American struggle. At the time of the American Revolution, English was the most predominant language in Britain's thirteen American colonies. There was also a significant German population. In the interest of unity, a vote was taken in which English was selected over German as the language of the new American nation. While the English language was used to create an essential spirit of unity among the colonists, especially in pamphlets such as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, the war did not result in many changes in the language or even in the way in which it was perceived by most Americans. Certain educational policies were enforced, however, that led to the loss of languages and dialects. Native Americans were the most adversely affected by such policies, as they were not allowed to continue speaking their native tongues. It can perhaps be said that Native Americans suffered a similar fate as the speakers of *patois* in France. The ideas of the American Revolution gave birth to an English-speaking nation, but the English language itself did not undergo a significant amount of change. Although there were certainly regional linguistic differences, especially between the northern and southern colonies, such differences did not exert a great deal of influence on the outcome of the Revolution. While some policies concerning the external factors of language were shared in America and France, those of the latter were more significant in that they had to unify a nation that linguistically was almost hopelessly divided.

The American Revolution was also significant for France, as King Louis XVI took the bold step of becoming the first official ally the newly-formed United States. This step also had implications for the change in the French language during the Revolution. French soldiers fought alongside the Americans for several years, and it was inevitable that they would absorb some of their ideas. Having officially committed to the war following the American victory at Saratoga in October 1777, the French were inevitably curious about the American cause and its quest for individual liberties. The History Channel reports that “the American Revolution might very well have been more popular in the salons of Paris than it was in some of the British Colonies”(The American Revolution, Path to World War). To the French crown it might have been an irresistible opportunity to publicly humiliate an ancient enemy, but in philosophical terms it was a manifestation of the the power that a people could exert on their king by insisting that their personal liberties not be threatened. Thus, the French soldiers were exposed to words such as revolution, liberty, and equality. This situation in America was quite different, as these once abstract ideas were now being asserted on a battlefield against the brunt of the British military. The philosophical lessons learned would prove indispensable to the French in their own struggle for freedom. There was, however, a key difference in that the American idea of freedom was not necessarily intended to leave the North American continent. On the contrary, the French definition was intended to spread to the rest of Europe and beyond. Nevertheless, the American struggle did influence some of the foundational concepts of the French Revolution.

Most societal changes, even major ones, seldom have such repercussion as regards the perception of a language. For example, it is very clear that the Scientific Revolution, which is generally understood to have taken place between 1550 and the early 18th century changed drastically the way in which the natural world is perceived. The long-enduring superstitions of religion were abandoned in favor of reason and empirical data. Incredible advances were made in astronomy, mathematics, physics, and biology, such that they still influence scientific thought today. In 1543 Nicolaus Copernicus

published his book *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, in which he suggested a heliocentric model of the Solar System. Many great contributors to the movement were French, like René Descartes, whose classic text *Discours de la Méthode* gained universal acceptance as a classic. Ambroise Paré, a French surgeon, gained notoriety for his adeptness in treating severe battlefield injuries. In the 17th century French physician Pierre Fauchard advanced many concepts that led to the development of modern dental science. Although these feats are incredible, they did not effectuate a parallel level of external language change that would result from the French Revolution.

Despite a plentitude of discoveries that were beginning to uncover the mysteries of the universe, the French people continued to speak their language. Despite its centrality in one of the most significant cultural movements in history, the perception of French remained the same. While internal changes were many in order to describe new scientific realities, the status of most languages remained the same. Perhaps the language that changed the most as a result of the Scientific Revolution was that of mathematics. French mathematicians such as Descartes were making startling new discoveries, which were to revolutionize the discipline. Although it is often regarded as a major turning point in human history, it did not have the same level of external language change that would one day be manifested in France as a result of the Revolution.

The lack of external language change can perhaps be illustrated with a final modern example. Many developments have emerged that have altered the human experience, even in the last twenty years. The Internet immediately comes to mind as an example. It has changed our social and even political reality so much that it has left an indelible mark on the human experience. It forever changed the way in which people communicate. The term has gained official acceptance in the lexicon of virtually every modern language. As monumental as it may be, the Internet has not, however, changed the external function of languages. For example, in the United States, the Internet has not effectuated

any change in the way in which the English language is used or perceived, nor has it done so in France in terms of the French language. Although the Internet provided a unified means of communication for anyone in the world, it did not even endeavor to establish an official language.

When examined through the lens of a modern perspective, the efforts of the French Revolution to change the external role of the French language would have to be considered to have had a mixed degree of success. Of course, France was much too chaotic during the early 1790s to effectuate the uniform and widespread change for which they had hoped. Although French had been made the official language of the new French nation, the *patois*, and even Italian and German, remained entrenched in the linguistic landscape of the country for centuries. During the Second World War, in which France was again forced to unite against the forces of Nazi Germany, it was discovered that varieties of *patois* had survived the Revolution. It can be said that eradication of such languages was never completely achieved, as pockets of them still exist in parts of France. Unfortunately, many of these dialects were still considered to be substandard languages as the 21st century was approaching. The goal of uniform language education was far too ambitious for a country in such a precarious situation. In fact, mandatory, standardized education would not be realized in France until the 1880s under the regime of the Third Republic. All things considered, it can be said that in many ways the desired linguistic changes sought by the government of France during the Revolution would not prove successful until long after the end of the 18th century.

One reason why the external changes were not immediately successful was because the government simply did not have enough time to effectuate such drastic modifications. As will be discussed in the following section, such changes usually require the span of generations, if they occur at all. Most importantly, it is virtually impossible to force such changes on a group of people. There will always be pockets of resistance to any sort of change that imply a drastic change to something so primal

as a native or even an everyday language. There is another very serious problem with attempts to standardize any language. It must be decided which dialect will ultimately replace the others. At the start of the French Revolution, the National Assembly simply assumed that their dialect of French, which was really only spoken by at most three million out of twenty-eight million people, should all of a sudden represent France. In reality, the language varieties of twenty-five million were suddenly to be rendered obsolete. Worse, they were to be branded as "inferior" languages. This method of thinking leads to a very common yet disturbing belief in linguistic superiority. The group of people with the most power think that they have the right to decide what all others should do. Paris was perceived by many to be the intellectual and philosophical center of not only France but of the world. They simply assumed that the status of their dialect of French would be commensurate with their fierce political power. A bit of modern thinking on the subject may, in some ways, shed light on the truth of the matter.

Of course, virtually everyone who is alive speaks some variety of a language. Also, everyone who speaks a language speaks a dialect of that language. There are no exceptions or qualifications that accompany the previous statement. Even though a certain dialect of a language may come to be considered standard, even in an official capacity, it still remains a dialect of the language in question. Even if it is a revered language that is used in all official capacities, it maintains its status as a dialect among many. The only difference is that a standardized dialect has the fortune of being spoken by a group of people with enough authority to canonize it. The French that is spoken in Paris, for example, has often been considered the standard by which to measure all other varieties of the language. It must be realized that even if Parisian French does gain official acceptance as being standard, it is still technically a dialect of the French language. Likewise, it is often claimed that the dialect of English that is spoken in the Midwestern portion of the United States is to be taken as the accepted standard for American English. Even if it is taught as such, it remains a separate dialect of American English, replete with its defining characteristics and varieties. It is not, however, from a linguistic point of view, superior

in any way to any other variety of the English language. During the French Revolution, while the French language did give a unified voice to the concerns that the majority of the French people were facing, it was foolish to believe that it could actually eliminate other dialects.

Although the efforts of the Revolution to standardize and unify the French language appear to have failed, there were some delayed victories that can be claimed nowadays when viewed through the lens of a modern perspective. All these attempts at unification culminated in the spread of French to the entire country and the strict regulation of the written language(Walter, 110). Of course, the obvious evidence of this claim is the fact that French is the official language of France today, and that it is used in virtually all official situations. Even though there are perhaps dozens of dialects that still exist, nearly all can understand “standard French.” The language became official in France in 1992. Accordingly, all government documents must be written in French. All public education is to be administered in French, with very few exceptions. Any advertisement in France must include a suitable translation of foreign terms. These facts may seem trivial, but not if they are to be examined through the lens of Revolutionary France. In fact, it appears that with the exception of the war against the patois, nearly all of the external linguistic goals have been achieved.

To take the concept a step further, the French language is considered a vital part of national identity of the French people. For example, in 1966 Charles de Gaulle, fearing that the French language was in decline, set up the *Haut Comité de la langue française*, with the aim of defending and spreading the French language(Walter, 128). Thus, a deep sense of concern for the status of the French language was maintained well into the 20th century. Of course, by the time of de Gaulle, such concerns were the result of efforts at colonization. Such a level of concern regarding the French language was a major objective of the leaders of the Revolution. It is also undeniable that the French language is one of the most established languages in the world. It maintains a presence on virtually every continent, to include

Europe, North America, and even Asia. French is often perceived to be a highly regulated and rigid language. This point is evident in that there are books available in virtually every part of the world that claim to present a standardized French grammar and vocabulary. Further, most of them are consistent in terms of their content and are accepted by scholars throughout the Francophone world.

There is an abundance of grammatical points of French that show a high degree of uniformity in various instructional texts. For example, in the *Passé Composé*, it is generally accepted that the past participle of a verb conjugated with *avoir* agrees in gender and number with the direct object when the direct object precedes the verb (Gordon, 44). In the example *Quels livres avez-vous achetés?*, the (s) is added to the past participle of the verb *acheter* in order to show agreement. If it is a verb that takes an indirect object, as in *je leur ai téléphoné*, there is no agreement with the past participle of the verb *téléphoner*. The same rule is expressed identically in the example *je l'ai vue au concert*, I saw her at the concert (Kendricks, 49). This rule, like many others of the French language, exhibits a high degree of uniformity among authors. These works are a further testament to the delayed success of the French Revolution and its impact on the language as it is spoken today.

While these definitions of the language have gained a high degree of acceptance, they do not necessarily suggest that other definitions or terms may be wrong. This point would have obviously stood in stark contrast to the leaders of the Revolution. In fact, such books actually present alternate terms that represent a regional variety. For example, in Québec the verb *abrier* is often used to mean *couvrir*, or “to cover.” In Québec, it is common to say *avoir le bec fin* “to be picky.” In France the appropriate expression is *faire le difficile*. In Québec the expression *se faire passer un sapin* means “to be tricked.” In France the equivalent expression is *se faire duper*. Finally, on stop signs, in Québec they say *Arrêt*, while in France they conform to the European standard in saying *Stop*. This suggests a mixed

level of success for the leaders of the Revolution in that while the standards are somewhat defined, there is still room for alternatives, especially in the dialects of French spoken outside of the Hexagon.

In speaking of the standardization of the French language during the French Revolution, the somewhat complicated history of the French Academy deserves consideration. Today it is known as a noble organization in terms of the French language, but that was hardly the case during the Revolution. Founded by Cardinal Richelieu in 1635 under King Louis XIII, it fell victim to the intense paranoia of the Terror and was closed along with all other academies in 1793. In 1795, all academies were replaced by a single body known as the *Institut de France*. Napoleon restored the academies, but they only existed as classes of the *Institut*. In 1816, under King Louis XVIII, the classes were all restored to the official status of Academies. The French Academy has existed ever since as a regulating body in terms of the French language. It is ultimately responsible for monitoring grammar, spelling, and literature. They have the unique authority to determine many standards of the French language. Today it enjoys a high level of respect among the French and has a reputation that even involves a certain degree of mystique.

The French Academy is composed of forty scholars known as *immortels*. The term *immortel* comes from the motto *à immortalité*, which was found on the official seal of the charter delivered by King Louis XIII. New members are elected by current *immortels*. Members of the Academy are intended to serve for life. Although it is rare, *immortels* can be dismissed in cases of severe misconduct. Since 1635, a total of twenty members have met such a fate. Upon election, the new member must deliver a speech which is to include a eulogy for the member that he will replace. After eight days, there is a public reception at which the new member again delivers a speech thanking his new colleagues for his appointment. It is quite a special occasion, both in terms of the history of the Academy and the life of the new member.

It is important to note the French government is not technically required to abide by the decisions of the Academy. Even so, they are usually highly respected. For example, each year the Academy publishes an official dictionary which is seen by many as the standard for the French lexicon. Further, the President of France is seen as the official “protector” of the Academy. This is a longstanding tradition that actually started with Cardinal Richelieu and the founding of the Academy in 1635. These facts all indicate that the French language is of tremendous importance to its speakers. In many ways it is afforded the same delicate treatment as an historical artifact. It is seen as being worthy of a high degree of standardization, maintenance, and protection. This prestigious status greatly surpasses that given to many other languages. For example, in America, the English language is not monitored nearly as rigorously. Likewise, the British also tend to downplay the status and regulation of their dialect of the English language. This difference suggests that the external language changes espoused by the Revolution are stronger than ever in the 21st century.

Although many of the external language changes that were attempted did fail, at least in terms of the revolutionary era itself, the French language was the driving force that ultimately led to the success of the Revolution. It was, after all, the language in which ideas were discussed and important documents, such as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen were signed. It was the language in which the fate of King Louis XVI was sealed, and it was the language in which the Terror was delivered, which ultimately bent all of France to the will of the Committee of Public Safety. The language created enough unity in the French army to ward off a considerable European coalition. French was the language of the Directory, which was successfully installed in 1795 to bring order and peace to a country that had been devastated by violence and destruction.

From a modern perspective, even the attempted external language changes that seemed to fail at the time of the Revolution were in fact delayed successes. French is very firmly established as the official language of France. It is considered mandatory in nearly every aspect of society. French is the third most common native language in the European Union, and its influence is certainly not bound by the edges of Europe. French has a very strong presence in Africa, as it is either the first or second language of some 31 Francophone countries. Finally, French is even one of six official languages of the United Nations. The language has been a resounding success, not just at home but also in many parts of the globe. The high degree of success can undoubtedly find a great deal of its inspiration from the pivotal events that began in 1789. Reminders of the external language changes that succeeded are manifested everywhere, from the street signs of Paris to the shores of North America. The cherished ideals of a generation and its revolution served as seeds that would one day grow beyond their imaginations. The most impactful external language change that resulted from the French Revolution was the combining of the terms language and nation. This union would set the tone for a special relationship between the two that continue well into the 21st century.

Chapter 2

While external language changes of the French Revolution often took centuries to be realized, internal changes occurred much more rapidly. Internal changes had a more immediate effect, and were indispensable to the ultimate success of the movement. Internal changes are generally easier to make than external ones, often only needing to be used in a speech in order to gain a foothold. For example, when terms such as “revolution” or “nation” were being discussed in earnest by the National Assembly during the summer of 1789, they caught on quickly and soon became two cornerstone concepts of the Revolution. Linguist Wendy Ayres-Bennett attested to the vast lexical changes that occurred during the

Revolution. She asserts that “if the Revolutionary ideal of educating all citizens to read and write French had little immediate effect, the Revolution nevertheless influenced the development of the language, and notably the lexicon, as fresh terms and new meanings were required to reflect the rapidly changing political situation”(Bennett, 229). This quote establishes the relation between external and internal language changes during the Revolution. Internal language change can occur so rapidly because a word or expression needs only to be utilized by enough people in order to gain acceptance. This occurrence can be greatly accelerated when the term in question is adopted by a group with considerable political power.

By the summer of 1789, the National Assembly was in such a position. They had seized control of the French government and established their decisions as final and definitive for all French people. Merely by discussing radical terms such as “nation” and “people”, they were ensuring that they would be repeated by a significant amount of the French people curious to know the developments of their new governing body. Such developments certainly were being discussed all over France following the outbreak of hostilities. In a matter of a few short years, these and many other terms succeeded in helping to establish and define a new modern nation. Modern examples are found in such terms as cool or hip. They are often used to refer to a measure of acceptance, sometimes more often than to refer to an atmospheric condition or an anatomical structure.

Such internal language changes can be brought about in as little as a generation. It is also important to note that they do not require any formal standardization to take effect. They simply require a level of acceptance and more importantly usage. For example, the word “nation” was used in the deliberations of the National Assembly long before the revolutionaries had defined it firmly in writing. The full meaning would certainly not be standardized in a dictionary until long after the epoch of the Revolution had ended. The establishment of such terms did not necessarily require any formal

definition, such as that which one would find in a dictionary. It simply had to be used by a large enough group in order to be effective. In the summer of 1789, the appropriate group would have been the National Assembly. Given the emotional fury of the Revolution, terms such as *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité* were christened with new meanings and spread like wildfire to virtually every part of the Hexagon. These internal changes were much easier to effectuate than an external change such as educational reform, which would require nearly a century to implement.

Prior to assessing the internal changes that occurred in the French language during the Revolution, it must be asserted that all languages are in a perpetual state of change. This linguistic phenomenon occurs regardless of the language or the historical period in question. Of course, terms from the preceding paragraph such as *liberté* and *fraternité* are products of internal language changes that occurred in the eighteenth century. In modern times French, like all other languages, is having to expand its vocabulary quickly in order to keep up with technological advances. The verb *faxer quelque chose* (to fax something) and the term *portable* (cell phone) serve as evidence of fairly recent changes that have occurred in French in order to adapt to a changing world. Internal language changes often shed light on the historical periods of which they are a product. For example, *liberté* and *égalité* clearly reflect the intellectual and social advances of the Enlightenment, which were thriving both in Europe and America in the late eighteenth century. In the early twenty-first century, most internal language changes involve technology, such as the Internet or even the computer. In demonstrating their continuity across the ages, it becomes very clear that internal changes are an integral aspect in the development of a language, as well as indicators of the historical events that they describe.

All languages will demonstrate a certain degree of internal change every generation. There is virtually no exception to this trend. It is merely a question of how much change will occur as well as the factors that will drive it. The most common factors are either war or technology. In fact, the only type

of language that will not display any change at all is a dead language. In linguistic terms, a dead language is defined as a language that no longer has any native speakers. Classical Latin would be perhaps the best example of a dead language. While it was once the predominant language in the ancient world and the Catholic Church, it is now virtually extinct outside the Church, except for classical texts of Ancient Rome. Even the Catholic Church has relaxed its usage of Latin, as the Mass can be celebrated in local vernaculars. Of course, Classical Latin is currently studied by linguists of Romance Languages in order to understand the roots of languages such as French, Spanish, and Italian. The study of the historical roots of the Romance Languages inevitably leads to a fuller understanding of their present characteristics, such as indefinite and definite articles. This is in itself a testament to the significance of internal language changes. Despite its immense historical value, in current usage the Latin language is largely extinct everywhere except in the Church. In order to study the internal language changes that occur in a living language such as French, the language must be divided into subcategories. While there can be many possible approaches to such a study, virtually every language shows evidence of three detectable aspects that are subject to change: grammar, phonology, and lexicon.

The grammar of any language is usually the slowest to show a discernable amount of change. Grammar is usually the most structured and codified element of a language. Grammar is often understood as a set of established rules that are intended to govern what is considered the standard usage of a language. These grammatical rules are often bounded in books and are accepted as almost canonical. As these books are often referred to and are taught as the ultimate standard of correctness, they are also regarded as the final word in any dispute that may arise. Often, many generations elapse before any grammatical change is detected. This does not, however, mean that such changes do not occur. The English language shows evidence of this fact. For example, even a cursory glance at a text written in old English will indicate that the language, just as in the case of Classical Latin, once employed

inflectional endings to convey meaning. A case is an inflectional ending added to the end of a word in order to communicate. In many instances, the inflectional endings were dropped in favor of a simpler means of communication.

In the case of the French Revolution, the grammar of the French language changed very little, if at all. This is primarily due to the fact that it occurred over such a short period of time. It was only a decade between the Tennis Court Oath of June 20, 1789, by which the newly proclaimed people of France vowed to write a new constitution, and Napoleon's coup d'état of 1799. Given that grammatical changes often require several generations, such modifications were virtually nonexistent during the Revolution. Luckily for the leaders of the Revolution, grammatical changes were probably also the least necessary. The term *nation* could serve as a prime example. This word, like many during the Revolution, spawned many derivatives that were indispensable to the spirit of the cause. *Nation* gave *national*, the adjective, and *nationaliser*, the verb. While such derivatives proved necessary, there was no need to change the grammatical structure or function of any of them, as there was a noun, an adjective, and most importantly a verb to describe the action. The verb, or action, was clearly the most critical aspect. The French Revolution was a movement in which decisive action was to replace mere ideas in the quest to secure the sacred freedom of humanity.

Phonology, or the way in which the sounds of a language are actually pronounced, also changed very little. As discussed previously, most of the languages spoken in France in 1789, particularly those which had been deemed *patois*, were the product of many generations of development. That is to say that, as is often the case even today, people were extremely set in their ways in terms of the pronunciation of their language. One example of a change in pronunciation involved the diphthong *-oi*. Previously, it had been pronounced as [we]. As a result of the Revolution, however, it shifted to its modern pronunciation of [wa]. The *-oi* is currently considered to be a semi-vowel with the

pronunciation of [wa], as in the word lois [lwa](Dansereau, 185). This speaks to the notion that many linguistic changes of the Revolution have endured the test of time, having survived more than two centuries. The fact that the semi vowel –oi has not changed since the 1790s indicates that phonetic changes occur fairly slowly. The phonology of the language changed to a greater degree than did the grammar, but in reality the changes in phonology would not prove to be the most significant. The changes in grammar and phonology certainly appear to be miniscule in comparison to those that occurred in the lexicon. These changes were so significant that they would define the human and social struggle of a people and launch a modern nation into the dawn of a new era.

The lexicon is always the component of a language that changes the most rapidly. Changes in the vocabulary of languages occur at a very high rate, especially in comparison with grammar and phonetics. Vocabulary changes in order to reflect new realities that affect nearly every aspect of life, whether it be political, social, economic, etc. It is also true that these terms require no acceptance in a formal or administrative sense in order to take effect. They are often simply terms that have the privilege of being utilized in everyday speech. The familiar contemporary term Internet could serve as a good example of this trend. The Internet is undoubtedly one of the most significant technological achievements of the modern era. It changed forever the way in which humans communicate. It is interesting though, that the term was used extensively around the world before it gained official acceptance in dictionaries. It would have mattered little if the term Internet had never made it into a formal dictionary at all. Internal language changes are often so successful because they require no such endorsement. In fact, the minute at which something is deemed to be useful, beneficial, or favorable, it often gains enough prominence to make fairly permanent changes in the lexicon of a given language. Such an internal vocabulary change can also gain acceptance if it is negatively impactful, as is evidenced by the terms terror and guillotine. This is exactly what occurred during the French Revolution, except that the lexicon changed at such an incredible rate that it set an historical precedent.

Given the incredible amount of change that occurred in the French lexicon during the Revolution, it is helpful to consider a relatively small group of words whose meanings were altered so greatly in an internal sense that they can be considered indispensable to the success of the Revolution as well as to the French national identity today. In this sense many internal changes that occurred became so significant that they inspired external changes that have lasted for centuries. Perhaps more impressive is the fact that many of the terms have kept their sentimental meanings far into the 21st century. It is certainly not necessary to look very far to find striking examples of such changes. The word *revolution* itself reflects an etymological journey whose destination is quite different than its origin. It descends from the Latin term *revolutia*, which meant to rotate in a scientific or astronomical sense. The term was used to describe the movement of physical bodies in space. In the Middle Ages, the term revolution maintained its meaning as an astronomical term that was used to describe the motion of a planet. It is important to note, however, that the British (and also the Americans) had been using the alternate meaning of the word prior to the French Revolution, which meant to topple a government. In 1788, as far as the French language was concerned, the term revolution certainly would have been understood almost exclusively as a scientific term. After all, as discussed in part one, the French had made incredible contributions to and had benefited greatly from the Scientific Revolution. It is incredible that a single word could manifest such a drastic amount of change in such a short time. As of the summer of 1789, the French would adopt the English meaning of the word, and this would become the prominent meaning in the French lexicon. It has clearly surpassed its predecessor, as today the mere mention of the term *revolution* in France is enough to stir emotions and remind a people of its struggle for freedom and equality. The term revolution serves as a microcosm of the unprecedented linguistic change that occurred during the French Revolution. Many French words would experience a very similar journey on their way to modernity.

It is only natural that such an important term as revolution would come to be used in a plenitude of contexts while passing through the movement that gave it new life. It has been determined that the grammar of French remained virtually unchanged during the revolutionary era. However, as new terms inevitably spawned derivatives, these new words would have to fit the existing paradigms of the grammatical structure of the French language. For example, the noun revolution would certainly need to be expressed as a verb, especially given the proactive nature of the Revolution. It then follows naturally that a supporter of the cause would need some form of identification. Such a supporter thus came to be called a *révolutionnaire*. Of course, there will be dissenters in virtually any cultural revolution that threatens to change so much at once. Consequently, dissenters of the Revolution came to be known as *anti-révolutionnaires*. This trend, which was very common during the Revolution, was one major reason why the growth in the lexicon was so exponential. For every word that was added, it would inevitably add up to four or five other terms in order to account for each grammatical category. This trend was also very common during the Revolution, often adding fuel to the fire of internal change.

Another critical example of an internal change affecting the French lexicon would be that of nation. This term merits special attention, since the French Revolution ultimately succeeded in changing how the term is defined in France. The new definition even set down roots beyond the French borders. This is particularly true when viewed from a modern perspective. In order to understand the term and how it relates to the linguistic history of the French Revolution, a brief etymological study is in order. The word *nation* descends from the Latin *natio*, which means to be born. This should not be surprising, at least to Francophones, as even a cursory glance will reveal an obvious resemblance to the modern French verb *naitre*. For that matter, it is also found to have the same root and meaning in several other modern Romance Languages (*nacer* in Spanish and *nascere* in Italian). In Old French the term evolved into *nacion*, which is not very far from its current form of nation. Perhaps more significant, however,

are the definitions that are attached to the term. Each of these would play a critical role as the French Revolution progressed.

One definition that can be applied to the term *nation* is that of a group of inhabitants that share a geographical area. In addition, this group usually shares a common governmental regime. It is important to note, however, that this first definition pays no mind to the ethnic identity or identities of a given people. That is to say that by this definition the people of a nation may be widely variant in their customs and languages. In examining the the cultural situation of France prior to the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789, this first definition is clearly the most accurate characterization. After all, although it might have been the only thing they shared in common, the French people were all inhabitants of the largest sovereign state in Europe. The King of France, considered to be the human manifestation of God on Earth, had ruled virtually without opposition for centuries. The *Ancien Régime*, of which he was the undisputed leader on the eve of the Revolution, was still firmly entrenched as the root of the social structure of France. Despite a strong and enduring social structure, the results of Father Gregoire's survey clearly reveal that France did not have a united ethnic identity at all. This difference was most detectable in the case of the language, as there were more than thirty dialects of French being spoken, many of which were mutually unintelligible. In terms of the first definition, pre-revolutionary France is a perfect fit. The people were bound together by a defined geographical area and blind faith in a monarch that was considered to be divine. This, of course, was not to last much longer, as the only certainty in France after the storming of the Bastille on 14July1789 was drastic change.

The second definition of the term nation was really the ideal of the leaders of the Revolution from the outset. By this definition, which seems more extensive and inclusive, the people share a more intimate bond. In this case, the people of a nation share many aspects of their lives that define them as human beings. These critical identifiers, which can often transcend the mere borders of a country can

include a common ethnicity, language, history, and even a culture. In order to engender such a cohesive commonality of values, the Revolution would require new language that would have to be just as unifying as it was insurrectional. Revolutionaries would not be disappointed, as the French language, replete with its fiery new lexicon would provide the fuel for the Revolution.

The French Revolution quickly found a great deal of its strength in the incendiary rhetoric of its sons. This concept is not really unique to the French struggle. Speeches have been used to inspire people since the dawn of humanity. While the great orators of the French Revolution have often been equaled in purpose, they have rarely been equaled in determination. Since individual lives and sacred personal liberties were at risk, the newly-formed French nation had to be rallied very quickly and effectively. During the communication of such fiery messages, the meaning of many words, along with French society, would be drastically and permanently altered. Of course, two of the most common and impactful of such terms are revolution and nation. There were many other terms that acquired new importance as the Revolution progressed. Prominent examples to be considered below are Jacobin, guillotine, and people. These terms would become so significant that they would transcend their denotative meanings and form the cornerstone of a new France.

This paper will consider two speeches that were delivered by highly skilled orators at critical historical junctures of the French struggle for freedom and equality. The first was delivered by Saint Just on 13 November 1792, just a couple of months after the dethroning of King Louis XVI and approximately two months prior to his execution via the guillotine. Louis Antoine de Saint Just was a radical yet inexperienced enthusiast of the Revolution. In 1792 he appeared before the National Convention asking them to actually put King Louis XVI on trial. In his speech, Saint Just referred to the King pejoratively as 'Louis.' The second speech was the work of Maximilien Robespierre, one of the most vociferous and charismatic leaders of the Revolution. He was once perceived to be so faithful to the Revolution that he

was referred to as “the Incorruptible.” He delivered the speech on February 5, 1794, in which he publicly sanctioned and in fact encouraged the Terror in order to purge France of her remaining counterrevolutionaries. The Terror would come to be seen as perhaps the most violent and bloody chapter in French history. By the Spring of 1794 it had actually become known as the “Great Terror,” since as many as 800 people were being executed per month in Paris alone. This was in fact a utilization of mass murder that was intended to bend the will of the French people to his maniacal will.

Together, the two speeches represented a struggle that was becoming increasingly brutal and merciless, one that would become so brutal that it would devour even many of its supporters. Robespierre and Saint Just had a great deal in common. They were both members of the Jacobin club, which had by the time of the Terror earned a fierce reputation as the most leftist and radical of the political parties in France. For example, it was they who were in favor of the beheading of King Louis XVI when the vote was taken in late 1792. Aside from their political association, they also were commonly associated with the guillotine, which would become known as the “national razor.” They had the unfortunate distinction of experiencing both sides of the guillotine. The two men used it to seal the fate of many, and both would ironically be silenced by its swift and merciless blade. It was perhaps the name Jacobin that most closely united the two, as much of the Terror’s fury was a product of the ideologies of this intensely radical party.

The term Jacobin itself is an example of a profound change, both in meaning and in perception. This was a common trend in the linguistic development of the French Revolution. A change in vocabulary would often be so impactful that it would alter the opinion of the French people. The Jacobins derived their name from the former Dominican convent in which they met. The building was located on Rue Saint Jacques, or *Jacobus* in Latin. The club was originally formed by a group from Brittany that had attended the convocation of the Estates General in 1789. They eventually attracted

members from all over France and numbered roughly 420,000. The Jacobins steadily increased their power in the spring of 1793, at which point they came to dominate France. They were easily the most leftist group and by far the most violent of the Revolution. It is from this fact that the modern term draws its meaning. Today, a Jacobin is a derogatory term for a politician who is far enough to the left in his policies that he is considered revolutionary. The external meaning or perception of the term has changed from a term that once had religious connotations to one that is associated with insurrectional politics, extreme violence, and even mass murder. The impact of the Jacobins on the French language persists to this day, as the term is often used in a derogatory sense to call attention to a politician whose policies are perhaps a bit too extreme. The change in meaning that occurred during the Revolution has endured, as the term maintains a pejorative connotation.

Saint Just and Maximilian Robespierre shared much more in common than an association with the Jacobins. Saint Just came to work very closely with Robespierre on the Committee of Public Safety, and the two steered the Terror to its most intense moment in 1794. The Committee of Public Safety was formed by the National Convention in 1793 to restore order after the beheading of King Louis XVI. Saint Just and Robespierre used their positions in this organization to wreak havoc on the French people in the name of the new French Republic. The History Channel refers to the Committee of Public Safety as a group of twelve that ruled France as a sort of dictatorship(History Channel, The French Revolution). Saint Just arrested and executed so many perceived criminals that he became known as the “Angel of Death.” At first, as the Revolution was beginning, Robespierre was against the death penalty in any form. In this initial stage he was known as “The Incorruptible.” Later, as the Terror got under way, he began to advocate for the death penalty, which he had come to see as essential in order to protect the integrity of the Revolution. During this time he also earned a pejorative nickname. He was called “dictateur sanguinaire,” or bloodthirsty dictator. It is quite ironic that the guillotine, a punishment that Saint Just and Robespierre had used to kill so many, would lead to their downfall and for that matter the

Jacobin club itself. The two were guillotined on July 28, 1794, essentially ending the most extreme period of the Revolution. By the time the two were killed, the guillotine was already making changes to the French language.

Unlike many words that were christened by the blood of the French Revolution, the etymology of the word guillotine does not lead to Vulgar Latin, but instead to the name of Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin. In October 1789, he approached the National Assembly with a proposal for a more humane method of execution. His proposal contained six articles, the first and most significant recommending that the death penalty be the same for all. There were additional articles protecting the property and family of the condemned, but the primary objective was to ensure that the death penalty was used to administer death instead of to cause pain. The quick drop of a blade was certainly more preferable to certain forms of torture that had been administered under the Ancien Regime, such as the breaking wheel or burning at the stake. Guillotin understood that these methods of execution had been designed to be rather slow and painful. The proposal for the guillotine was successful, as the first execution by guillotine in France occurred in April 1792. Dr. Guillotin's idea was true to the principles of the Revolution in that it provided for swift and equal punishment. As far as anyone could tell, it was a quick and painless death. While Dr. Guillotin will always be known to history for his association with the guillotine, he was actually not the one who designed the mechanism.

In devising the guillotine, it was actually Antoine Louis who led the committee that designed the machine. He is the one who truly deserves to be associated with the guillotine. He also happened to be a physician to the king. It is quite ironic that the King's physician, the one most responsible for his well-being, would one day become so intricately associated with his death. In any case, the guillotine brought about the deaths of many thousands of people during the Revolution. Estimates range from 16,000 to 40,000. The number of deaths multiplied at the dawn of the Terror in 1793, as people were

led to the “National Razor” for the most trivial reasons. Many were executed for no real reason at all. The guillotine served as a device employed by Jacobins of the Committee of Public Safety in order to ensure order and most importantly conformity to their many policies.

The guillotine survived the French Revolution, and even today remains a part of French pop culture. The last public execution by guillotine was held in 1939, and the guillotine was last used in France in 1978. It remained the official method of execution until the death penalty was repealed in 1981. The guillotine was used in France for almost two hundred years, and it certainly had a lasting effect. Indeed, although the history of decapitation machines dates back at least eight hundred years, it is the guillotine that dominates, an evocative, chilling image entirely at odds with its original purpose of a painless death(europeanhistory.about).

While the invention of the guillotine had a drastic impact on the Revolution, it also produced a complete collection of derivatives that to this day serve as a chilling reminder of the bloody brutality of the epoch. For example, there is the verb *guillotiner* and naturally the past participle, *guillotiné*, which was certainly applied during the Revolution. The sentence, “*beaucoup de gents ont été guillotiné*,” or many people have been guillotined, is a context in which the past participle continues to be used in history books. It is very clear that this internal change in the form of a new word was so impactful that it continues to resonate in the minds of French people. The new term, while it started as an internal change to the language, it came to have an external impact in that it is likely to remain forever etched in the French psyche.

When Saint Just emerged to deliver his speech before the National Convention on November 13, 1792, he was very young and inexperienced. At just twenty-five years of age, he had never been a member of an Assembly, and he had certainly never delivered such a significant speech. France was debating the merits of putting their former king on trial, and Saint Just came forward as perhaps the

most fervent advocate of not only a trial, but also of capital punishment, which was obviously the most severe punishment possible. This was perhaps surprising from a man who only a year earlier in 1791 had written a book entitled *L'Esprit de la Révolution*, in which he defended both the Constitution of 1792 and the constitutional monarchy. His work had clearly declared the King to be "inviolable," and as such he could not be tried under any circumstances. Having had a complete change of heart, in November 1792 he had come to believe that the path to justice for the king would have to include an appointment with the guillotine. Saint Just, like Robespierre and for that matter the majority of France, had had a change of heart and was prepared to transition into a much more extreme period of the Revolution. The debate in which Saint Just delivered his speech had convened in order to decide if the king could be put on trial. If he could be tried, it had to be decided which charges he would face.

In delivering his speech, Saint Just utilized many new terms that had been redefined by the outbreak of the Revolution. He saw it as absolutely imperative that the people of France unite in order to bring about the demise of the king, who he frequently referred to pejoratively as simply 'Louis.' By the time Saint Just delivered his speech, King Louis XVI had been dethroned. Now he was even being reduced to a social status that was below that of a common citizen. According to Saint Just, it was time for the French people to wake up and truly make a unified decision about the fate of their former ruler. While he was clear about his extreme position that called for the trial and death of Louis, he also reiterated several times the fact that he was amenable to the ultimate decision of the people. This choice in tactics underscored his commitment to the values of the Revolution in leaving the ultimate choice in the hands of the people. In order to persuade the National Convention, he naturally would employ terms that reflected the unity of the French people. The words that he used most frequently in his speech were citizen, people, and Republic.

A fiercely determined Saint Just wasted no time in arriving at his point. He began by saying, “I shall undertake, citizens, to prove that the king can be judged.” The use of the term citizen or *citoyen* to refer to all was an internal language change brought about by the Revolution. It was decided that the titles of Monsieur and Madame would be replaced by the terms *citoyen* and *citoyenne*. As a further move toward equality, *la regle du tutoiment*, or the law of the *tu* form was passed in November 1793. It was implemented so that all citizens would be equal in status. It also encouraged a level of familiarity, as people could forget about the class distinctions and possible social mistakes that can occur with the usage of both the *tu* and *vous* forms. The *vous* form is of course employed when one speaker is more advanced than the other in either age or status. It is also used when the speakers do not know each other at all. The leaders of the Revolution eliminated all such roadblocks by simply affording the same status to everyone. This is an internal change that did not survive very long, as it was abolished in 1795. The rigid distinction between the usage of *tu* and *vous* has certainly not diminished over the centuries. Of course, this rigid difference between the two personal pronouns has survived well into the 21st century, as such rules are taught and stressed in any basic French language course.

The actual word *citoyen* is a descendant of the Latin term *civitas*, or the rights of a person living in a city. In this sense, while the word has inevitably changed in its journey from Latin to French, its meaning has not shown many changes. It was the French who changed it the most as a result of their movement. Until the time of the Revolution, most societies of the world had very rigidly defined social structures. The rulers of such societies, often kings, enjoyed such an elevated status that they would never be counted among the citizenry. This firmly-established tradition that had persisted for centuries was abruptly altered by the French Revolution. Saint Just gives evidence of this in his speech by referring to his former king simply as ‘Louis.’ This was quite a pejorative term for a man who had occupied the throne of the largest nation in Europe. In fact, he does much worse by proclaiming that

“we remain divided and treat a tyrant with gentleness.” At this point Louis has not only lost his citizenship, but he is in fact to be considered an enemy of the newly-created French state.

The term tyrant(*tyran*) is quite an important choice of words, especially in referring to the former King of France. The term tyrant actually traces its roots to Greek. In Ancient Greece, a tyrant was considered one who illegitimately took control of a polis. According to Plato and Aristotle, a tyrant was one who “rules without law, looks to his own advantage over that of his subjects, and uses extreme and cruel tactics-against his own people as well as others.” In Latin, the word is *tyrannus*, or illegitimate ruler. Meriam Webster Online Dictionary agrees, defining *tyrannus* as “absolute rule, as by a local dictator in ancient Greece or medieval Italy.” The dictionary also defines the word tyrant as “an absolute ruler, unrestrained by laws or a constitution.” The term *tyrannus* found its way into Old French sometime in the late thirteenth century, and of course exists today in French as *tyran*. All of the above definitions appear to suit the view of the Revolutionaries quite well. Saint Just himself made a reference to the Ancients in his opening argument against his former King. He says, “someday people will be astonished by the fact that humanity in the eighteenth century was less advanced than in the time of Caesar.” He went on to mention the swiftness and severity with which criminals were handled, often receiving “thirty blows of a dagger” with virtually no legal formalities. According to Saint Just, it was a grave barbarity that the former King would possibly be given the benefit of a trial. He considered the prospect of a trial a major regression in the history of human justice. This view may seem surprising when examined through the lens of the 21st century, since a fair and peaceful trial is considered a cherished aspect of many modern systems of criminal justice. On the contrary, Saint Just feels that the cruel and swift punishment of criminals practiced in the Ancient World was the most advanced. It is likely that he favored such extreme punishments because they sent the clearest message. Such a view would be consistent with his rhetoric. More than just words in a fanatical speech, this treatment of

perceived tyrants would become a reality and prove foundational to the Terror that would soon come to devastate France.

It is astonishing that King Louis XVI went from God to beheaded traitor in just under four years. This journey was undoubtedly expedited by the rhetoric of Revolutionaries such as Saint Just. The word tyrant would never even have been breathed in association with the King's name prior to the outbreak of the French Revolution. In early 1793, however, it was a word that would topple the well-established *Ancien Régime* and culminate in his execution. In French the term *tyran* has survived into the 21st century, and its meaning is very similar to that employed during the French Revolution. It is defined today in French primarily as a despot or harsh ruler. Hence, it is a term that has successfully traversed the ages. In modern times it is even used to describe a harsh boss, as in, "*ma patronne est un vrai tyran.*" In other contexts it can refer to an uncooperative child. It is thus a term that drove one of the most subversive movements in history and has actually expanded the scope of its meaning in the modern world.

Saint Just realized that what he was proposing was extremely serious. He also understood that France would be scrutinized very closely by the world and even by history for how it handled its struggle for freedom. The fate of the king was perhaps the most serious of issues. It was therefore evident that every word of his speech had to be chosen meticulously. With this in mind, Saint Just said, "and citizens, if we were to grant him a civil trial, in conformity to the laws and as a citizen, it would be him who would be trying us." The people of France had to unite in order to ensure that Louis received his proper punishment, and for Saint Just that included execution as a criminal. If they were to fail to do so, it would be the strength of the Revolution that would be on trial. If Louis was to somehow still intimidate the French with his former status, he would gain the victory and the Revolution in some ways would be considered ineffective. Saint Just is urging the people not to allow the King to exert the psychological

dominance that he had enjoyed on the throne. Saint Just probably realized that, being at the mercy of the French people, psychological warfare was the only hope that the King had left. The French people were being called upon to use their newfound independence and authority to do what was right, no matter what it meant in terms of the past.

At the time that he delivered his speech, which was just prior to the outbreak of the Terror, Saint Just still realized that the ultimate decision as to the fate of Louis was in the hands of the citizenry. This was, after all, a principle that the Revolution had fought so hard to establish. He acknowledged this fact by stating, "citizens, the tribunal which must judge Louis is not a judiciary tribunal...it is a council, it is the people, it is you." He understands that he will ultimately have to accept the majority decision in the matter. The ideological cornerstones of the Revolution mandated such deference to the will of the people, at least prior to the outbreak of the Terror. It is for this reason that he took the opportunity to address the National Council. He was essentially the first to take such an extreme position publicly. He was appealing to the citizenry so that they would realize that they were no longer to be helpless victims to an unscrupulous regime. They now had the power and authority to direct the future of their nation with their vote. As far as Saint Just was concerned, the citizenry could not be afforded a greater privilege and responsibility.

The second term that Saint Just employed extensively in his address to the National Convention was that of *peuple*. It is really an extension of the term *citoyen*, in that *le peuple* represents the collective whole of all of the *citoyens* in a society. Etymologically the word *peuple* is a descendant of the Latin *populus*, which in the Roman Empire meant the collection of citizens that had the right to vote. The term has shown several forms throughout history, such as *poblo* (842) and *pueple* (circa 1000). The term *peuple* as it is used in French today is thought to have been established around the first quarter of

the 15th century. In any case, its meaning would once again be put to the test by the incendiary rhetoric of Saint Just.

The French Revolution greatly extended the meaning of the word *peuple*. In 1792, every citizen was granted an equal vote, which were counted at the end of the day in order to determine the collective choice of the citizens, or the voice of the people. This was a much fairer policy than was under effect when King Louis XVI had summoned the Estates General to Paris in 1789. They had voted by class instead of by head. It was this fact that had incensed the Third Estate and had sparked hostilities. This is because the policy ensured that the Third Estate was silenced by the overwhelming power of the other two Estates. By late 1792, much had changed as the cooperation of the people was of paramount importance. Saint Just made this point very clear: "You will be told that the verdict is to be ratified by the people. The people must act to avoid being slaves." He meant that if the people neglected their responsibility to determine their own future, they would inevitably relapse and again be shackled by the chains of despotism. Further, if the people failed to execute King Louis XVI, they would be enslaving themselves to his power, which he would continue to exercise to an extent if he were allowed to live. It is often true that when making a fresh start, especially after a traumatic experience, it is essential to eradicate all remnants of the past. Saint Just understood that France was being confronted by such a situation. He also invoked the new definition of the word people when he included himself as one of them. He said, "I shall desire what the people of France, or the majority of its representatives, desire." While he is clearly attempting to move the people toward the difficult decision to execute King Louis XVI, he is at least in the text of the speech willing to go along with the final voice of the French people.

A final word that was of great importance in the speech of Saint Just to the National Convention in November 1792 was that of Republic. One indicator of its significance is the fact that it is capitalized in the text. In terms of etymology, republic is a descendant of the Latin word *res publica*, or public

matter. Traditionally, a republic is defined as a country that is ruled neither by a despotic ruler nor by a privileged few who were the sole beneficiaries of such a system, which was clearly the case in France under King Louis XVI prior to the Revolution. It is also important in the case of a republic that officials be elected, instead of being awarded a certain position or status due to heredity. Some more liberal definitions claim that a republic is simply a government that is not under the direction of a king. At the time of the speech of Saint Just, France would have met both criteria. The leaders of the Revolution made the word republic a special addition to the French lexicon that today still conjure up images and sentiments that reflect a triumphant epoch as well as the immense promise that it offered. The term republic was a clear indicator that France had turned a corner in their history in entrusting their well-being to a representative government. They were also faithful to the definition of republic in ensuring that King Louis XVI would never again reign over France.

The first mention of the word republic in the text occurs thus: "These same men who are to judge Louis have a Republic to create." In this statement Saint Just is in essence defining Louis and Republic as terms that are mutually exclusive. That is to say that a nation that was committed to a republican system could never support the existence of a king. While there are some countries of the world that are republics and still maintain some form of monarchy, it was clear in 1792 that Saint Just was advocating for the most extreme interpretation of the term. He was after all, a Jacobin, which was not coincidentally the most radical political party in France at the time. In taking the drastic step of establishing their own republic, it was inevitable that the French people would have to get rid of the King. If he were to be allowed to live, the door would always be slightly open to his adversely affecting the outcome of the Revolution. Even if his influence were to be merely psychological, it could still be substantial and detrimental to France. The hesitance to execute him before the speech had been delivered on 13Nov1792 and even the fact that there was a debate at all showed at least to some extent a lingering effect of the power that the King and his predecessors had exerted over their nation for so

many centuries. According to Saint Just, it was time to muster some courage and carry the Revolution past the point of no return.

Perhaps in reference to their somewhat noncommittal attitudes, Saint Just goes on to scold the behavior of his countrymen when he says , “We desire a Republic, independence, and unity, but we are divided and treat a tyrant with gentleness.” In this case he is criticizing what he interprets as a lackluster attitude on the part of his countrymen in terms of the fate of the king. He also utilizes the first person plural pronoun *nous*, or we. This usage is hardly accidental. He uses it in order to stress the fact that for the first time in history the French people are all in the same situation. Instead of elevating himself to a position of superiority, Saint Just, by using *nous*, is instead situating himself at eye level with his fellow countrymen. All of their futures and fortunes hinge on the outcome of their struggle, and so nothing but the most rigorous attitude will lead to success. He is also strongly indicating that the establishment of a republic and all the wonderful things that can come with it are by no means inexpensive. Unity and purposeful action are of paramount importance. He sees unity as essential to the republic, something that can never be achieved as long as the king is allowed to draw breath. Louis is being portrayed in the speech as antithetical and even toxic to the success of the Revolution and the liberties that the French people are seeking. Unless the people become more decisive and act in accordance with their principles, the Revolution is likely to stall and perhaps not be successful in the end. A people so desperate for freedom and equality must act with vigor and ragged determination.

In utilizing the word Republic a final time, Saint Just ultimately stakes the future of the new French nation on the way in which the people deal with their former king. He is thus saying that their behavior in 1792 will have an immediate impact and set the tone for the new republic. He is in essence asking the people to consider the execution of the king as a convincing show of faith and an investment in their future. Saint Just realizes that the trial and execution of the king are just the first steps on the

road to creating a society that reflects the values that are cherished in the hearts of Revolutionaries. If the National Convention was paralyzed by the first step of truly bringing the Revolution to fruition, one had to wonder how they would face even greater challenges in the future. Saint Just believed that the answer could be found in the principles of a republican government. Although he had to change his views drastically from those of his earlier work, Saint Just, in articulating the genuine Jacobin position of the time, had become convinced that the infant French Republic would not survive its own Revolution if she could not produce such a substantial token of faith in itself.

As the final line in the speech sums up what Saint Just wanted to communicate: “It is therefore you who must decide if Louis is the enemy of the French people, if he is alien.” He of course switches pronouns in this concluding statement because he has already made up his mind. As the first to articulate such a position, or that which would become the Jacobin position, he needed no convincing. It was now his countrymen who would ultimately decide the next step of the French Revolution and for that matter the new French Republic. The conviction contained in his rhetoric was clearly effective. Although the words of Saint Just cannot be given all of the credit, on December 11, 1792, King Louis appeared before the National Convention to hear the indictment against him. On January 15, 1793, the 721 deputies of the National Convention overwhelmingly declared Louis to be guilty of high treason. There were 693 deputies who voted guilty, while only twenty three voted for his innocence. On January 21, 1793, King Louis XVI was guillotined at the Place de la Révolution so that the new Republic could be proudly and fearlessly proclaimed. Such historical milestones would most likely never have been realized without the fierce rhetoric of Saint Just and the internal language changes that it inspired.

Maxamilien Robespierre delivered one of the most significant speeches of his political career on February 5, 1794. Although it was far less than two years since Saint Just had appeared before the National Convention in an attempt to seal the fate of the King, much had changed in France. The

Convention had clearly sided with Saint Just, in that King Louis XVI was executed in January 1793. In doing so, France had taken the bold step that pushed it past the point of no return, and in early 1794 Robespierre delivered a speech that he hoped would steer the Revolution in a more specific direction. As leader of the Jacobin club and also the Committee of Public Safety, he was in the midst of piloting the “Terror” phase of the Revolution to its most ruthless and violent level. The blade of the guillotine was falling very easily and frequently, as people were being executed at an unprecedented pace. As many as 800 were being executed per month in Paris. In many cases, people lost their lives based on unfounded suspicions. Robespierre feared, however, that until 1794, the Revolution had not had a central defining principle. It had merely been guided along by events as they occurred, but had not firmly asserted a defined purpose or set of values. Robespierre, as usual, felt that he had the most suitable solution. He delivered his speech to the Convention in February 1794 with the purpose of defining and advocating the Terror, which he saw as the only way forward if the French Revolution was to be successful. Robespierre, once “the Incorruptible” champion of human rights and a staunch opponent of the death penalty, was now utterly convinced that the Terror was not only necessary but entirely justified in light of the circumstances in which the Republic found itself.

The French word *terreur* is a descendant of the Latin term *terror*, which means “great fear.” Terror itself is a derivative of the Latin verb *terrere*, meaning “to frighten.” Its usage to describe the bloodiest stage of the French Revolution would cause not only a major internal change to the French lexicon, but also to that of the world. Indeed, the French Revolution marked the first time that the word *terror* was used in such a way. Such a definition of terror finds its roots in the rhetoric of the Jacobin club and their policies, which had its greatest influence over France from the spring of 1793 until the beheading of Robespierre himself on 28 July 1794. While the Terror and the Jacobins themselves lingered somewhat following the death of Robespierre until their ultimate dissolution in October 1794, their movement clearly lost its venom in August. The impact of the Terror on the French lexicon is

undeniable. The term became synonymous with the Revolution to the extent that many dictionaries have separate entries that specifically address the Terror that was administered during the Revolution. Its transcendence across languages and cultures is yet another strong testament to the incredible impact of the internal language changes that resulted from the French struggle for freedom.

As usual, in gaining the floor Robespierre wasted no time in asserting his agenda. Early in his speech, he declared, "it is time to mark clearly the goal of the revolution." The time for a reactionary government being tossed around like a ship in a storm was over. It was time for the Terror, which according to Robespierre was the ultimate manifestation of virtue, or love of one's nation. Robespierre presented his argument quite logically. First, he ascertains that the most important aspect of France is virtue. Secondly, he defines virtue specifically as an intense love for a nation and its laws. In using the word nation in this context, he is clearly referring to it in the context of both of its definitions. The simultaneous application of both definitions of the word nation was certainly one of the most significant internal language changes of the entire French Revolution. The geographical borders of France, which had increased due to a successful war effort, and the new French culture that was emerging were both to be considered integral to Robespierre's interpretation of nation. In fact, it was the second context of the term, or that of a common culture and ethnicity, that was now more relevant and impactful. It was this intense love of nation, a word that had been modified as a result of the Revolution, that ironically would lead to the most devastating period that France had ever known.

Robespierre considered this new definition of the term nation so impactful that he referred to it as a virtue. He understood virtue to be so sacred that it needed to be defended vigorously until the last man, and was never to be compromised. His extreme definitions of virtue and terror proved to be dangerous, as it led him to believe that all dissenters of his noble cause must be dealt with swiftly and severely. He said, "We must lead the people by reason and the people's enemies by Terror." He went

on to make one of the most enduring statements of the Revolution: “Virtue, without which terror is fatal; Terror, without which virtue is impotent.” He was in essence redefining what love of one’s country was actually supposed to mean. As long as the Terror was guided by a sincere love for the French nation, it was perfectly justifiable. Secondly, he is asserting that one cannot genuinely love and look after one’s nation without the use of the Terror. It is thus the Terror that was to give teeth to the spreading of true virtue. Robespierre’s method of living out his famous quote entailed sending thousands to the guillotine. The execution of massive amounts of people at a time served to eliminate dissenters and to underscore the importance of conformity to the policies of the Revolution. The widespread use of the guillotine also maintained a critical aspect of the Latin definition of the word terror: fear. For example, if everyone walking the streets of Paris lived with the constant threat of being led to the guillotine, they would surely yield to Robespierre’s policies. While the Terror and the guillotine were certainly known for bloodshed and murder, they also helped to make the Terror synonymous with fear.

While defining and encouraging the Terror was certainly the primary objective of Robespierre’s speech to the National Convention, he also used several other terms and phrases that served to indicate the indispensability of many internal language changes that were being made. In fact, most of them were so crucial that today they maintain their place in the French language and even in the soul of France. One such term that Robespierre uses in his opening remarks is revolution. This word is used extensively in the oratory of the Revolution, but what is interesting about this speech is that Robespierre utilizes a couple of derivatives of the term revolution. For example, he says, “within the scheme of the French Revolution, that which is immoral is impolitic, that which is corrupting is counterrevolutionary.” In this case he uses what could be considered the original internal change, or revolution. In the last word of the sentence, he adds the prefix “counter,” while turning it into an adjective with the ending –ary. Thus he creates an adjectival derivative of the term revolution. This is one very important reason why internal language change can occur so quickly. The rate of internal language change was

exponential largely because each new word would often inspire a handful of new terms, each having a specific grammatical purpose.

Accordingly, Robespierre also used some nominal derivatives to characterize those that he perceived to be adverse to the Revolution. For example, he said, "you could never have imagined some of the excesses committed by hypocritical counterrevolutionaries in order to blight the cause of the Revolution." The obvious difference here is that the word counterrevolutionaries is used as a noun instead of an adjective. It was evidently ascribed to known opponents of the Revolution, and those who Robespierre perceived as oppositional to his mission. He utilizes another derivative in declaring: "the double task of the moderates and false revolutionaries is to toss us back and forth perpetually between these two perils." Robespierre uses this statement to target another group that he has come to despise as a result of his extremism. Robespierre, and for that matter Saint Just, believed that the French people were being confronted by the most important moment in their history. It was not a time to consider the merits of both sides of an argument. The pilots of the Terror such as Robespierre and Saint Just would not allow such indecisiveness. Moderates were people who either could not make up their minds, or those who had but favored too much of a compromise to be helpful to the cause. False revolutionaries were perhaps worse, because although they knew they didn't support the Revolution, they acted like they did. It was in fact the persecution of this faction of the population that led to the Terror raging out of control. Even those who appeared to be in any way indifferent to the Revolution would draw Robespierre's wrath. Anyone who had the misfortune of even being suspected of such a mindset risked being given an appointment with the National Razor.

There were many similarities between the speech of Saint Just and of Robespierre. That is not altogether surprising, since they were both members of the fiercely radical Jacobin club that was terrorizing France. In fact, Saint Just had become the confidant of Robespierre, and the two men

communicated frequently. They agreed, for example, that the violence of the Terror was the only way to deal with dissenters of the Revolution. This was an indiscriminate form of terror, as it blanketed French society from the King to the poorest of the poor. Neither man would allow even the slightest degree of flexibility in his ideology. They both addressed their speeches to the collective “people” of France. Robespierre begins with “citizen representatives of the people”, implying that it is now all citizens who are to be counted equally and to form one collective “people” of France. Both utilized the term Republic extensively, and saw the protection and well-being of the new Republic as the most sacred mission of the Revolution. Most importantly, the fact that several terms were used in different speeches that occurred two years apart speak to the notion of internal language changes that had occurred. Robespierre used such terms as revolution, liberty and Republic in a very similar way, which gives evidence that the internal language changes had taken effect. Their continued usage well into the 21st century further testifies to the permanence of such changes.

Robespierre, just like Saint Just, utilized the term Republic when he addressed the National Convention in 1794. Prior to mentioning the word itself, however, Robespierre made a reference to it when he said that the French were to “seek an order of things where commerce is the source of public wealth rather than solely the monstrous opulence of a few families.” He thus defined the term republic according to its Latin meaning, or that which is of public rather than private business(*res publica*). All persons, which as a whole are considered to constitute the republic, are now of the utmost importance. He goes on to remind his audience that the previous institutions that had ruled France were unacceptable and contrary to the well-being of the people. He mentions specifically that the presence of an aristocracy is just as detrimental as a monarchy to a functional republic. He also considers his “republic” to be most unique in world history in that it sought to be universal, eliminating any qualifications to the term. One might think of the American Revolution(1775-1783) as the first instance in which the term republic was so radically redefined. While a republican government was successfully

established in America, there were several crucial differences between the French and American definitions of the term Republic. The French definition of the term was much more broad and inclusive. The French intended for the liberties granted by their Republic to extend to all men. Unfortunately, women would be left out, as they would not win suffrage in France until 1944. Despite the strong language of the American Declaration of Independence, the United States government also ignored women and struggled with the issue of slavery. Slavery would not be abolished in the United States until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in December 1865. Even this fact can be misleading, since racism and segregation in America continued for at least another century. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the American Declaration of Independence, targeted slavery in his initial draft, although any mention thereof was promptly discarded by the Congress. They knew it was wrong, but lacked the time and perhaps even the courage to fix it. The French, by contrast, did manage to eliminate slavery in all its territories in 1794. Although Napoleon did restore slavery when he came to power, it was still an incredible achievement for the Revolutionary generation, especially when taken in the historical context of the period. The French definition of republicanism was also unique in that it was to extend its principles beyond the borders of France. It was thus referred to as a sort of universal liberty. The American definition of republic was not to extend beyond their own shores. In fact, George Washington, the first President of the United States, stated in his farewell address in 1797 that the American Republic was to draw much of its strength from its isolation from Europe. By contrast, when the National Convention came to power in 1789, their republican ideas were to extend to all humankind. The location of France in Continental Europe would certainly facilitate the spread of their interpretation of republican ideas. The French thus provided the broadest interpretation of a republic.

Robespierre continues to utilize the term republic in formally introducing the Terror. He first declares virtue to be the “soul of the Republic.” Since virtue had already been defined as a “love of country,” it follows naturally that in his view the success of the nation that had been created will rely

heavily on an intense manifestation of patriotism. In order to protect their new institutions, he states that they must “smother the internal and external opponents of the Republic.” It is clear that Robespierre is taking a very radical position that justifies any means necessary to achieve his goals for France. He is in essence justifying the unprecedented wave of violence that had devastated France since early 1793. Just as in the case of Saint Just, Robespierre was strongly encouraging the French people to adopt a very brutal policy that he saw as essential to the survival of the newly-formed Republic. His extremism would not be limited to political or even social motives. In his speech Robespierre would also endeavor to establish some moral grounds for his position.

Saint Just and Robespierre utilized the word liberty similarly in their speeches. This term is certainly one of the most enduring symbols of the Revolution, and it is today a cornerstone of the motto of France: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. That is to say that the term *liberté* made such a strong internal change to the language that it also effectuated an external change. The utilization of such a word by Saint Just and Robespierre in their speeches led to a change in how the word was perceived. Today, as is evidenced by the national motto, the term has not only survived but become integral to the identity of France. Etymologically liberty finds its roots in Latin, as *libertas*, (freedom), or *liber* (free). Saint Just made one very significant mention of liberty when he said: “Sensitivity of our minds and character is a great obstacle to liberty.” He was establishing liberty as a primary goal of the Revolution, and the hesitance to try the king as a severe hinderance to that goal. True liberty would remain unattainable if the French people were not to eliminate him. Robespierre makes a similar mention of liberty when he says: “What is the goal toward which we are heading? The peaceful enjoyment of liberty and equality.” Thus, both employed the term as a fundamental objective of the cause. It is somewhat ironic, though, that Robespierre, whose radical policies had caused the death of thousands, would include the word peace in his speech. This is just one example of the frequent contradictions that were witnessed during the French Revolution.

Liberty may also be the most important term that was being considered during the French Revolution. It was undoubtedly given new life by the rhetoric of speakers such as Saint Just and Maximilien Robespierre. Although their interpretations of the term might have been questionable, its effect can hardly be questioned. The Third Estate had so much faith in the new definition of liberty that in a matter of six years they used it to uproot virtually every element of French society. They used it during that time to abolish a powerful king and a very stratified social structure. Their efforts culminated in the formation of the Directory in 1795. It is true that the Directory was short-lived. On November 9, 1799, or 18 *Brumaire* by the French Republican calendar, Napoleon Bonaparte executed his famous *coup d'état*. Although it was fairly quickly supplanted, the journey to the establishment of the Directory underscores the power of language and its effect on a society. At every step, the French Revolution was guided by the innovations in the French language. The innovation to the word liberty was perhaps the one that drove the whole Revolution. This is because it is one of the most intrinsic desires of all humanity. It transcends the limits of race, creed and continent to represent a universal value. The Americans changed the meaning of liberty, and the United States was born. The French came to believe in their own sense of liberty, and the formidable Ancien Regime was toppled on the way to establishing a form of representative government. Internal language change is certainly an ongoing process, one that can tell the story of any culture of the world.

Conclusion

The French language underwent much change during the French Revolution. Although the changes are somewhat complicated, they can be divided into two major categories: external and internal. External language changes that were attempted during the Revolution are the standardization of the French language, which included a massive attempt to standardize education. The National Assembly saw linguistic unity as essential to the ultimate success of the Revolution as well as that of the new French

nation. This linguistic unity proved nearly impossible during the Revolution, primarily because over the centuries France had evolved into a diverse mixture of cultures and languages. In short, it would prove impossible to force 28 million people to speak the same language overnight, or even within a few years. Educational reforms proved futile due to the chaos that engulfed France following the outbreak of hostilities. Linguistic unity and for that matter a sense of pride in the French language was achieved primarily through the military campaigns that began in 1793. Mass conscription drew soldiers from virtually every corner of the Hexagon. This naturally encouraged movement toward a common language, and also led to a new feeling of nationalism.

When viewed solely from the perspective of the French Revolution, it can be said that the attempted external language changes were not very successful. While not effective in the last decade of the 18th century, the changes have all proven successful when viewed through the lens of modernity. French is the official language of France, revered as a sign of unity by the people. The language is also taught in all French schools. The French Academy acts as a governing authority on all matters of French language and literature, and it does so without the manipulative authority of a monarch. It can be said that the Revolutionaries drew up the blueprint that became Modern France. They can all thus be considered delayed successes of the French Revolution.

Internal changes had a much more immediate impact. Although French grammar remained virtually unchanged, while phonology changed very little, it was in the lexicon that the most significant modifications occurred. Such changes were inevitable, as a bold generation was endeavoring to breathe life into Enlightenment ideals such as liberty and equality. Given the insurrectional attitude of the Revolutionaries, it is only natural that terms such as revolution, nation, and republic would be radically redefined. These changes became most evident in the rhetoric of a group of French orators, who delivered key speeches at critical historical junctures of the Revolution. Saint Just and Maximilien

Robespierre are prime examples because they were among the most radical speakers that France had ever known, just as the execution of King Louis XVI and the Terror are among the most historic moments in France. Their rhetoric produced such significant internal language changes that they remain today foundational elements of the French national identity. The most evident example would be the national motto of France: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*.

Finally, there is a certain interplay that can occur between external and internal language changes. One can be the product of the other. For example, the terms nation and liberty were redefined as a result of the French Revolution. Within the French language itself, they gained new meanings that formed a new nation. The fact that such sacred terms were changed within the French language tended to elevate its status. The French people united under such terms, and outside of France the language actually became associated with the ideas of liberty and revolution. The reverence that French earned is of course an example of an external change. In this example, an internal change led to an external change in that there was a change in meaning followed by a change in perception. This process was commonplace during the French Revolution, and it is one reason why the French Revolution was so significant. It redefined French society in so many ways, and in particular the language. Languages do not always play such a critical role in revolutions. For example, during the American Revolution, terms such as liberty and nation also were redefined, particularly through the rhetoric of Patrick Henry and the pen of Thomas Paine in such classics as *Common Sense* and *American Crisis*. While these ideas gave birth to a nation, the status of the English language was not nearly as significant. This speaks to the uniqueness of the external language changes that occurred as a result of the French Revolution.

The heritage of France as a modern nation finds many of its roots in the advances of the French Revolution. An abused and repressed people stood up to their king and the corrupt social structure. In

doing so, they demanded that their basic inalienable human rights not be violated. Such ideas were discussed in the salons of Paris and in the National Assembly following the separation of the Third Estate from the Estates General in June 1789. The same ideologies were committed to writing in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen In August 1789. They led to the execution of King Louis XVI in 1793 following the fiery speech of Saint Just. Finally, words such as liberty, virtue and terror, which were ferociously articulated before the National Convention in February 1794, led to the deaths of thousands of people during the Terror, which was the bloodiest period of French history. These historical milestones would have been impossible without the accompaniment of the French language. The saga of the French Revolution could never have occurred without the role of the French language and the pivotal changes that occurred. It is perhaps one of the most important functions of a language to tell the story of the culture that it helped to shape. Language and history often paint a fairly accurate picture of one another. The language of the French Revolution recounts the remarkable struggle of a nation as it endeavored to break the chains of the past while striving toward modernity.

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