Transforming Breton: A Case Study in Multiply Conflicting Language Ideologies

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This study describes a complex and contested set of efforts by mid 20th-c. language strategists in Brittany to modernize and standardize the Breton language in a calculated attempt to hoist Breton to the rank of a world language. It considers accomplishments and setbacks of those efforts, and reactions to them by the traditional Breton-speaking population. It is shown that the language strategists were motivated by conceptions of language refracted through a lens colored by strong notions concerning language and identity and language and political economy. The conclusion considers the possible implications for the perpetuation of Breton as one of Europe's 'small' languages.

1. Introduction

In their 1994 review article on language ideology, Woolard and Schieffelin observe that the new direction for research on this topic treats it as "a process involving struggle among multiple conceptualizations and demanding the recognition of variation and contestation within a community as well as contradictions within individuals" (1994: 71). The importance of recognizing contesting ideologies revolving around language is evident in recent studies of language revitalization efforts in a number of societies in Europe (e.g., Basque,

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Galician, Corsican, Catalan, Occitan, Walloon, Welsh, Irish Gaelic, Hungarian) and in other parts of the world (e.g., Mexicano in Mexico, Quechua in Peru, Tamazight in Morocco, Tiwi in Australia).[1]

While such studies indicate similarities in the situations and prospects of minority languages existing within larger, dominating political entities, each revitalization case presents its own ideological conflicts and contradictions. My purpose in this paper is to take a closer look at the Breton situation, well known to me through years of research on this language and through contact with Breton speakers differently positioned in the socioeconomic and educational structures of Brittany. The Breton case is also of interest due to the attention it has received in historical, anthropological, and sociopolitical accounts of Breton language activism, militancy, and nationalism.

In theorizing nowadays about nationalism and other forms of collective identity, it is commonly accepted that notions of nationhood are to a significant degree constructed or invented by a people—typically its well-educated elite—to promote the collectivity's welfare and to foster a sense of loyalty to it. This process is well-captured in such classic works as Hobsbaum and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), and in Benedict Anderson's notion of the *imagined community* (1983). Although I agree with some other scholars that one can too uncritically run with the idea of invented traditions (cf. Nadel-Klein, 1997), I do find this perspective applicable to the development of the new Breton (neo-Breton) that will be discussed below.

In any event, it is useful to consider to what degree language constitutes a central component in a people's notions, invented or not, of their traditions or their nationhood. More particularly, when the members of a minority group endeavor to characterize themselves as a distinctive socio-politico-regional entity of some sort, there may or may not be a great deal of attention paid to the role of the historically-associated language in the construction and proclamation of a new or emergent collective identity. For example, efforts by the Scots, since

[1] Excellent studies of these minority language situations include: Urla, 1993 (Basque); Roseman, 1995 (Galician); Jaffe, 1999 (Corsican); O'Brien, 1997 (Catalan); Eckert, 1983 (Occitan); Gros, 1993 (Walloon, Tamazight); Trosset, 1993 (Welsh); Maguire, 1991, O'Reilly, 1999 (Irish); Gal, 1993 (Hungarian); Hornberger and King, 1996 (Quechua); Hill and Hill, 1986 (Mexicano); Lee, 1987 (Tiwi).

the nineteenth century, to gain recognition as a nation independent of England have not incorporated, at least not robustly or persistently, a call for the re-Gaelicization of the nation. Also, the Irish, following independence in 1922, made Irish Gaelic an official language of the Republic, and though the language has the respect of the Irish people and is a mandatory school subject, it has not, for centuries, been viewed as an essential component of cultural or political Irish identity. Political movements in Wales have, by contrast, concentrated on the Welsh language as key to the sense of Welsh history and identity.[2]

Breton in Brittany is closer to the Welsh than the Scottish and Irish cases in its identification of language by movement activists as a principal ingredient in the nation-building projects of the twentieth century (McDonald, 1989). However, there has been conflict even in this regard, stemming in part from the division (through historically gradual, not mandated, processes) of Brittany into an eastern French-speaking half ('Upper Brittany') and a western, Breton-speaking half ('Lower Brittany'). An early-movement ideological conflict arose among members of the first avowedly Breton regionalist society, established in 1898, with francophone leaders from Upper Brittany claiming that Breton was not needed to advance the economic and political reforms advocated by the society.[3] Bretonophone leaders (who were, more accurately, Breton-French bilinguals), on the other hand, insisted as a matter of principle that Breton should be taught (along with French) in Brittany's schools. Heated debates arose between the two sides on the language question, with the Breton speakers finally withdrawing from the organization, which died in 1911. The organization was, however, succeeded by numerous others in subsequent decades.

2. The Sociolinguistic Situation

Breton is a Celtic language of the Brythonic subgroup, which has been spoken continuously in the western portion of France traditionally called Brittany since the third or fourth centuries CE. While the

[2] See Williams (1999) for a comparative study of the socio-political economies of the British Celtic languages.

[3] There was a conflict here too. While on the one hand the francophone Breton nationalist leaders in the early 1920s urged their followers to learn Breton, on the other they sometimes argued that their lack of knowledge of the traditional language heightened their sense of being Breton (Reece, 1977: 29; 93).

Breton upper classes became French speakers (or bilinguals) during the tenth through twelth centuries, the great mass of the population remained monolingual Breton speakers until the end of the nineteenth century. Matters changed dramatically after that: by the mid twentieth century, the vast majority of all Bretons were bilingual or monolingual in French. A recent survey of the current practice of Breton in Brittany (Broudic, 1997) concluded that there are about 240,000 people who speak the language on a regular basis; this is out of 2.8 million in the Breton "Region,"[4] and out of a population for Lower Brittany (where Breton was historically spoken) of about 1.2 million (Broudic, 1997: 140). Thus, Breton is numerically a minority language within its traditional territory. Moreover, because the age pyramid of this Breton-speaking population is inverted, with the bulk of the speakers in older age cohorts, the language is losing speakers much more rapidly than it is replacing them. Ultimately, if this relationship of older to younger speakers persists, the language will become threatened. According to Broudic, by 2010 there will be just under 100,000 Breton speakers (1997: 124).

As noted earlier, during the twentieth century a number of political, economic, and socio-religious organizations aimed at promoting Breton interests both formed and withered away. The story of these groups is complex and cannot be treated here.[5] For the balance of this paper I will focus on the efforts of those Breton movement activists in the twentieth century who did see language at the heart of the regionalist/nationalist enterprise and accordingly engaged in corpus planning, molding and shaping a new form of Breton in conformity with their ideas of what Breton as a national language should be. Central to their efforts were attempts to determine whose Breton was to be valorized by elaboration to standard or 'national' language status.

The situation confronting these language planners—a self-selected oligarchy of teachers, writers, and journalists for the most part—was complex, to be sure. Breton had survived in Brittany for 1600 years chiefly as a set of geographically differentiated vernaculars spo-

[4] Not including Loîre-Atlantique, which has an additional 1 million people. Historically and culturally a part of Brittany, it was administratively detached from the other four départements of the Peninsula in 1941.

[5] The interested reader is referred to Reece (1977), Fortier (1980), and Nicolas (1982).

ken by peasants, fisherfolk, and artisans. The Breton aristocracy (though not the clergy) had centuries earlier abandoned Breton for French, and no significant literature had been produced in the language.[6] Several generations of scholars had grouped the vernaculars into four regional "dialects," which were said to follow closely the lines of demarcation among the four dioceses of traditional Catholic Brittany.[7] Thus, the twentieth century language strategists had to make a number of decisions, such as which regional variety to select as the basis for standardization, how to cope with different orthographic representations, and whether or not to incorporate features of the southernmost dialect, the most distinctive of the four.

Another important decision these strategists faced regarded the extent to which they were willing to innovate. Early on in their efforts, led by Roparz Hemon, an English teacher turned linguist and militant language activist, the impulse was to turn to vernacular Breton, rich in dialect diversity, as the basis for corpus expansion. Early in his career as a Breton language reformer, Hemon averred:

> Nous voulons nous mêler au peuple . . . car il est la chair de notre chair. Ce n'est pas comme des imbeciles que nous venons le regarder, mais comme des fils respecteux . . . cíest en lui que nous trouverons le sens de notre litterature, de notre vie. . . . (quoted in Lebesque, 1970: 179)
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> We want to mix with the people . . . for they are the flesh of our flesh. We do not come to them as imbeciles but as respectful sons . . . in them we will find the meaning of our literature, of our life. . . .[8]

Yet only several years later, in the inaugural issue of the literary journal *Gwalarn* that Hemon launched in 1925, he and his fellow

[6] Breton monasteries from the seventh-eighth century on produced a considerable quantity of manuscripts. Many of these were destroyed by Norse invaders who began ravaging coastal areas of Brittany in the ninth century, though some were carried to safety in other parts of "France" and the Continent. Even this early literary production was rendered chiefly in Latin, however, with Breton glosses in the margins of manuscripts. These manuscripts constitute one of the chief sources of information about Old Breton.

[7] This is an over-simplification, though the inadequacies of this typology cannot be discussed here. See Timm (2000) for further information.

[8] This and subsequent translations of French (and Breton) are my own.

reformers clearly had turned 180 degrees around, introducing the journal to its readers in the following terms:

> Revue litteraire destinée a l'élite du public bretonnant . . . pour la première fois une revue bretonnante preséntera exclusivement à des lecteurs instruits des articles faits pour eux—travaux d'une irreprochable tenue littéraire, *et fermant la porte aux patois (même decorés du nom de dialects)* . . . déclencher un mouvement général de l'élite bretonnante. (quoted in Nicolas, 1982: 86; emhasis added).

> A literary revue destined for the elite of the Breton-speaking public . . . for the first time a Breton-language journal will present exclusively for educated readers articles made for them—works of an irreproachable literary standard, and closing the door on patois (even those decorated with the name of dialects) . . . unleash a general movement of the Breton-speaking elite.

This change in attitude toward dialects, and hence toward the importance and role of native speakers, meant opening the door wide to innovation, syntactic as well as lexical. It significantly influenced the development of the version of Breton that would be adopted by professors and students at the Celtic Section at the University of Rennes, and, partially as a result of this, the one utilized in the Diwan network of immersion and bilingual schools that began emerging in western Brittany in the late 1970s. It was largely this version, too, that began emerging in the broadcast media in the 1970s.[9]

3. Issues of Language-in-Culture

While these efforts may sound fairly encouraging for a receding minority language, they mask a profound conflict at a deeper level among the Breton people, for there is a fault line running between native and non-native speakers of the language. This line (scarcely geographical) separates what Michael Agar (1994) has termed distinct *languacultures*. The notion of languaculture (adapted from Friedrich's earlier *linguaculture*) insists on the intimate and obligatory connection between language and culture, with language being tied to "the situations of use" (Agar, 1994: 96). Agar continues:

> The *langua* in languaculture is about discourse, not just about words and sentences. And the *culture* in languaculture is about meanings that include, but o well beyond, what the dictionary and grammar offer. (Agar, 1994: 96; emphases original)

The Breton language reformers emphasized corpus innovations, which focus on the expansion of lexicon and on grammatical normalization (the "words and sentences" in Agar's comment). They rarely, if ever, considered discourse practices, which, as Agar notes, perforce embody aspects of culture that transcend what is usually offered in grammars and dictionaries. As remarked recently by Ronan Le Coadic (1999), building on Claude Duneton's notion of *connivence* ('complicity') in conversational interaction:

> Une phrase simple est immédiatement comprise: tout le monde "saisit non seulement la nature de l'action [qu'elle décrit] elle-même, mais ses circonstancs concrètes, et je dirais auusi l'état psychologique qu'une telle action suppose chez l'individu." (Duneton 1978, quoted in Le Coadic 1999: 245)

> A simple sentence is immediately understood: everyone "apprehends not only the nature of the action itself [that the sentence describes], but its concrete circumstances, and I would also say psychological state that such an action assumes in the individual."

Relating this to traditional Breton, Le Coadic continues:

> Cette connivence est très forte en breton quand la prosodie et la syntaxe de la langue sont maitrisées et à condition de connaître un certain nombre de codes et de regles de savoir-vivre qui viennent du monde rural. Sans cela, les bretonnants de langue maternelle éprouvent une gêne, une sensation d'artificialité. (Duneton 1978, quoted in Le Coadic 1999: 245)

> This complicity is very strong in Breton when prosody and syntax have been astered and on condition of knowing a certain number of codes and rules of lifestyle that come from the rural world. Without that, Breton mother-tongue speakers feel ill at ease, [feel] a sensation of artificiality.

[9] At present Breton may be heard on approximately thirteen different radio stations for fifty hours per week. The situation for television has changed dramatically since August 2000, with the launching of the first-ever Breton language channel, Télé Breizh (Texier and O'Néill, 2000:19).

Traditional Breton speakers come overwhelmingly from rural, working-class backgrounds, while the language reformers-both earlier and today-are urban and intellectual. They draw on aspects of culture familiar to them in renovating Breton, aspects which do not resonate with traditional speakers. For example, the Breton personal titles *Aotrou* and *Itron* correspond superfically to French *Monsieur* and *Madame*. But these terms have been extended to uses in neo-Breton that are unacceptable to traditional speakers, who reserve them for addressing persons of very high rank; *Itron* in particular is the respectful term of address to the Virgin Mary. When traditional speakers hear neo speakers addressing them (the traditional speakers) or each other, as *Itron* or *Aotrou*, the discordance is acute, and, as Le Coadic notes above, a feeling of discomfort and artificiality is engendered. In short, there has been from the outset a cultural gap that has not been addressed in the process of renovating the language. Because of this, in large measure, miscommunication and bafflement have been a feature of conversational interactions between traditional and neo speakers of the language.

Another way of considering the difference between traditional and neo-Breton is afforded through Woodbury's (1998) analysis, in an entirely different languacultural context (Yup'ik Eskimo of Central Alaska), of what he calls the rhetorical strategies, aesthetic principles, and expressive practices (henceforth RAE practices) that are highly specific to given speech communities. He lays out what he calls a theoretical principle that both emerged from and guided his work:

> In any situation where the arbitrary patterns of a lexicogrammatical code are harnessed to constitute, shape, or model communicative purpose or content, expression is crucially dependent on form; to the extent that such form-dependent expression is (or is part of) a socially significant com-municative practice or process—as it can be in verbal art, ritual, *and even ordinary talk*—its continuity is dependent on linguistic form, and hence is lost if that form is lost (Woodbury, 1998: 238; emphasis added).

To illustrate what he means, Woodbury focuses on the affective suffixes in Cup'ik (a dialect of Central Alaskan Yup'ik), especially the one translated in English as 'poor,' or 'poor/dear.' Woodbury finds that the Cup'ik suffixes cannot be translated into English without losing

their nuances. He imagines for a moment that they might be, arguing:

> Such an English would almost certainly be judged unusual against the rhetorical and aesthetic principles of "mainstream" English: thus theadjectives would appear to be used too noticeably, too repetitively, and at times incorrectly . . . and in general the system would attract such negative characterizations as "too wordy," "too cute," or "too sharply evaluative." It is unlikely, moreover, that such an English could attract the necessary loyalty or achieve a stability of use patterns, sufficient for Cup'ik/Yup'ik communities with their small populations, to resist the pressure from "mainstream" English norms (Woodbury, 1998: 256).

What applicability does all this have to Breton? In this case, we are dealing not with a shift in language per se, as was clearly so in Woodbury's study, but, largely due to the dominance of French among the Breton language reformers,a grafting, as it were, of *French*-based RAE patterns and practices onto the from of Breton they were constructing. As with the Cup'ik-inflected English that Woodbury describes, the French-inflected neo-Breton is generally negatively evaluated by native speakers. The reactions of native speakers range from frustration at their inability to understand neo-Breton, to bemusement that anyone would bother promoting the language, to satisfaction with its ameliorated status in comparison with their memory of its unfavorable image when they were young. However, all are agreed that this new Breton is quite a different creature from the one they knew and may still be practicing today. It has, in effect, been "transformed," not merely "revitalized" (cf. Bentahila and Davies, 1993).

4. Contrasing Traditional and . Neo-Breton: Some Examples

Space does not permit a full analysis of the contrasts between traditional and neo-Breton, but an idea of the differences may be seen in the following discussion.

The Breton reformers made heroic efforts to eliminate French-derived loanwords, replacing them with neologisms based on Breton (or Welsh) roots. This step is often perceived as vital to the image of the new variety that reformers wish to establish as an independent language able to stand on its own lexical feet (cf. Duneton, 1978; Eckert, 1983;

Hornberger and King, 1996). However, native speakers have been drawing, for generations, on vocabulary derived from the dominant language, and they are often indignant at, or baffled by, the proposed lexical innovations. Examples from Timm (1982) are given in (1):

(1)

Neo- Breton	*Traditional Breton*	*French*	
baleadenn	promenadenn	promenade	'walk, promenade'
abeg	rezen	raison	'reason'
digoll	reparasienn	reparation	'reparation'
palenn	tapis	tapis	'carpet'
prof	prezen	présent (n.)	'present, gift'
stalioù	magazinoù	magasins	'stores'
berrloeroù	chausetoù	chaussettes	'socks'
listri	vaisseloù	vaiselles	'dishes'
gwalc'herez	machinalave	machine à laver	'washing-machine'
baraerezh	boulangerezh	boulangerie	'bakery'

At the same time as they endeavor to avoid French-derived loanwords characteristic of the traditional Breton speakers, the French-dominant learners of Breton can scarcely prevent themselves from resorting to French lexemes when at a loss to remember the "authenticated" neo-Breton word, thus producing nonce (one-time) loanwords, while the native speakers use loanwords that are well-established in their particular speech communities. The latter are very sensitive to this distinction (between nonce and established loanwords) and may find this sufficient reason in itself to switch to the dominant language in their interactions with L2 speakers (personal observation; Miossec 1999).

French also influences neo-Breton in idioms calqued on French. A few examples are provided in (2)-(5):

(2) *kemer* *ur* *banne*
take a shot
'to drink a shot/glass' [of wine, etc.]

This is calqued on French *prendre un verre*. Native Breton speakers would likely use a different verb here: *pakaañ* ('catch'), or *ur banne* or *evañ* ('drink') (Miossec, 1999:21-22).

(3) *ober* *e* *ziouer*
do/make his mourning
'to mourn for someone'

This is based on the French *faire son deuil*, which employs the possessive adjective before the noun *deuil* ('mourning'). However, native Breton speakers would say, *ober an diouer*, using the definite article (*an*) rather than the possessive adjective, since use of the latter in this Breton construction implies that one is mourning for oneself (Miossec, 1999: 30).

(4) *ober* *ar* *garantez*
do/make the love
'to make love'

This is calqued on the French expression *faire l'amour*. Traditional Breton ways of expressing 'to make love' include:

ober *gwele* *gand* *eur paotr/plah*
do/make bed with a man/woman

kousked *gand* *eur paotr/plah*
sleep with a man/woman (Miossec, 1999: 21).

Hence the amused, or perhaps offended, reaction from native Breton speakers upon hearing (5):

(5) *ober* *ar* *gwele*
do/make the bed
'to make the bed'

Based on French *faire le lit*. To a native Breton speaker's perceptions the meaning of this phrase is much closer to the meaning of (4) than to the intended one, which would be conveyed in traditional Breton as:

dresañ *ar* *gwele*
arrange the bed (Miossec, 1999: 37)

All of these usages ring strangely, even bizarrely, on the ears of native Breton speakers.

Finally, part of the verbal art of traditional Breton is the frequent deployment of *proverbs, sayings, maxims*, and *riddles*.[10] The language reformers who shaped neo-Breton did not choose to emphasize this dimension of the traditional language in their emerging grammars and methods. In fact, they rather deliberately eschewed it. In some instances, French proverbs, like the idioms just noted, were translated into Breton, but this only contributes to the alienation or incomprehension on the part of the native speaker population to the new Breton variety. In short, neo-Breton is almost totally lacking in the RAE practices of traditional Breton.

5. Conclusion

Omitting much of the rhetorical, aesthetic, and expressive richness of the traditional language in the process of "inventing" neo-Breton has resulted in a version of the language that native speakers find "cold," "colorless," and even "chemical" (cf. Varin, 1979). As a result, a communication gap between old and new speakers has emerged, rendering it very difficult for those L2 Breton speakers who desire to interact with native speakers to be able to do so; the latter, as noted earlier, quickly make judgements about the L2 speaker's (lack of native) proficiency and switch to French. Some of this problem is languacultural as well, as discussed above, inasmuch as the two sets of speakers represent almost completely different speech communities, reflecting in turn their generational identity, levels of education, and work and life experiences. Perhaps more effort could be made with native speakers to involve them as advisors/tutors in such now widely-promoted programs as Breton language classes, workshops, and summer language camps, as well as to include them more regularly as language consultants in the preparation of pedagogical materials.[11]

I am not the first to make such a suggestion (cf. Le Dû, 1997; Miossec, 2001), though all who suggest such an initiative acknowledge that it will be necessary to overcome inertia, apathy, and even

[10] Sayings are familiar expressions or sentiments, maxims are sayings that typically have to do with conduct, and proverbs are "concise statements of an apparent truth that have currency among the people because they contain a generally accepted insight, observation, and wisdom" (Mieder, 1986:ix) .

[11] Research in second language acquisition points to the importance of structured native speaker input for the process of language acquisition by non-native speakers. See, for example, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) and Ritchie and Bhatia (1996).

hostility on the part of a portion of the native speaker population (Dagnet, 1990: 49). This is a challenge, given the often negative attitudes about Breton that had been inculcated at an early age among these older speakers (Prémel, 1995), and the pragmatic turn toward French that took place voluntarily among Breton speakers in the aftermath of WW II (or even earlier). It will therefore take some special efforts to pull native speakers into the pedagogical circuits of the neo-Breton world, and, admittedly, such efforts may not succeed. However, given the fact that a substantial number of native speakers is still available, it seems more than unfortunate to ignore this great resource that, lying fallow too long, might yet be cultivated for the further development, and perhaps re-nativization, of some aspects of neo-Breton.[12]

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[12] A further debate could be engaged on the very utility of this idea, i.e., mounting efforts to codify a language, or form of a language, that is no longer actively used in the speech community (cf. Silverstein, 1997: 410). In other words, should people just let the traditional language (set of vernaculars) die a natural death and rest content with the reinvented form of the language? Le Besco (1997) raises this question (not quite in these terms), passim, in his recent work on Breton languaculture.

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