Language Ideologies in Brittany, with Implications for Breton Language Maintenance and Pedagogy

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This paper explores ideologies underlying the construction of "neo Breton," the 20th-c. "standardized" form of Brittany's traditional Celtic language, considers the benefits and losses of the establishment of this variety as the standard one, and raises pedagogical questions and concerns for its long-term viability.

Introduction

'Language ideology' has emerged in recent years as a distinct area of inquiry within a variety of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Its appearance is timely for anyone working in the context of minority languages and cultures, whether in Europe or elsewhere, for the perspectives offered by this emergent field have clear relevance for understanding issues pertaining both to language planning efforts and to teaching of minority languages. The purpose of this paper is to explore some aspects of language ideology in Brittany, and to consider their impact on present-day efforts to promote the learning and use of Breton in the schools and in wider society.

There is probably no universally agreed upon definition for 'language ideology'. As Woolard (1998:4) points out, there are several senses in which this phrase is invoked by scholars concerned with issues at the intersection between attitudinal, epistemological and aesthetic stances on language, on the one hand, and with language praxis on the other. For this paper, I am using 'language ideology/ideologies' to refer to notions regarding linguistic distinctiveness, value, "purity" and standardization, and the relation of these to the realities of language use in Brittany today.

Brief Overview of Breton and of Language Ideologies & Language Planning in Brittany

Modern spoken Breton consists of four major dialects that correspond, grosso modo, to former dioceses boundaries. There are three northern dialects, *léonais, cornouaillais,* and *trégorrois*, that are closer structurally and phonologically to each other than any of them is to the fourth, southern dialect known as *vannetais*. In reality, the situation is far more complex, for each large dialect area is itself comprised of numerous more localized subdialects, and all field researchers in Brittany are familiar with the almost legendary claim by native speakers that their Breton is "not the same'" as the Breton spoken down the road, or over the hills, at 10-15 kms. distance.

As a written language, Breton has been codified in several different versions. Middle Breton (11th-16th c.) produced two written "standard" languages based on the Breton used by the Carmelite and Franciscan priests in the Tregor dialect area, especially around the Bay of Morlaix; these became, in the early 17th c., the basis of the Breton used in the Jesuit colleges of Quimper, in the *cornouaillais* dialect area, and Vannes, in the *vannetais* dialect area (Le Dû 1997). Following the French Revolution, the former bishoprics of Brittany were reorganized as *départements*, and a third written standard emerged for the newly formed Côtes-Du-Nord, comprising the *trégorrois* dialect area (ibid.). In spite of the anticlerical bias of the revolutionary government, in Brittany these three written standards were used principally for the production of devotional materials for the common people.

In the 19th c., another sort of movement was launched in favor of written Breton. This came in the wake of the 'Celtomane' fervor of the mid 1800s (Dietler 1994), when certain Breton enthusiasts sought to establish Breton as the original human language and to assert the primacy (and superiority) of the Celtic 'race'. Numerous reforms in the orthography were introduced to normalize the orthographic representation of the initial consonant mutations and to

eliminate a large number of French-derived words replacing them with native stock. Clearly operative during this epoch was the drive for purification and expurgation of French influence.

The 20th Century Situation

Language ideology of the Breton literati. As one Breton linguist has observed (Le Dû 1997:423), the labors of the 19th-c. purists were not truly aimed at the construction of an official standard language, a project that would only take shape with the emergence of Breton nationalistic fervor and organizations of the early 20th c. It was during the latter period that language promoters would call for a "unified" Breton to serve all the people. This would be difficult to achieve given the divergence among dialects and especially the linguistic distance between the southern dialect *vannetais* and the other three, and in reality was never successful beyond positing certain spelling reforms in 1941, including, the famous digraph ZH, which was to be pronounced in the three northern dialects as [z] or [s] (depending on position in word) and as [h] in the southern dialect. This orthography was dubbed, because of the ZH innovation, 'zedacheg', and was destined to become symbolically potent to subsequent generations.

The new cohort of reformers had in mind a rather complete overhaul of Breton grammar and lexis, which were judged too deficient and French influenced to serve as a proper basis for renovation. The most renown of the reformers, Roparz Hemon (1900-1978), was forthcoming about their intentions to create "A brand new language for Lower Brittany, simple and pure, in which you can work with the truth more than in the old languages of the world" (1972:52). Le Dû detects the influence of Esperanto in this project (1997:424). But unlike the Esperantists, who wanted a universal language to facilitate cross-cultural communication, the Breton reformers had a much more focused goal in mind, for they were ideologically committed, as nationalists, to create "A literary language first, from 1925 to 1941. From 1941 on, a language of State" (ibid.:425).

The predominant version of the language today, neo-Breton. The construction of this "brand new language" of a state-to-be was based on logic and abstraction. Hemon, an urban Breton who learned the language as an adult, devoted the rest of his life to perfecting the new literary language and to its propagation via the publication of scholarly essays, reviews, translations of world literature and the creation of a new secular literature. The language on which

he toiled was not strictly speaking "brand new" but rather built on inherited forms of written Breton, for which the process of dialect leveling and normalization that had been going on since the 16th c. Thus, Hemon's 20th-c. literary Breton could be described in part as a pan-dialectal koiné, with a bias toward *léonais* pronunciation - for example, no palatalization of velar consonants before front vowels, which is widespread in *vannetais* as well as certain subdialects of *cornouaillais*. In addition, the structural and linguistic differentiation of Breton vis-à-vis French was emphasized by these reformers, with the goal of achieving a purer "Celticity" in syntax and lexicon. At the same time Breton was promoted for symbolic purposes in public domains where it had not historically had much of a role. Finally, the Romantic 19th-c. notion of one people=one language was dusted off and given a new sheen in the context of 20th-c. Brittany.

Since the 1970s Hemon's version of Breton has been taught at the University of Rennes and in public and private bilingual schools, of which there are about 140 in Brittany. As a result it has become the principal variety of the language learned by younger people, and this means, given the current demographics of the native speaker population of the language, that this is the variety with best chance of perduring in the 21st century.

Mari Jones has recently characterized neo-Breton as a "xenolect," following Holm's definition of xenolects as "slightly foreignized varieties spoken natively, which are not creoles because they have not undergone significant restructuring" (Holm 1988 quoted in Jones 1998:323). The "slightly foreign zed" features presumably arise because neo-Breton is being taught to learners by adults who did not learn it as a first language and have learned it imperfectly, which may imply influence of French word order, simplification of the mutational system, and loss of various tense/mode distinctions. Jones observes that

> The creation of the Neo-Breton xenolect may have repercussions for the field of language death for it is possible that such a variety...may represent the pre-terminal phase of some dying languages in particular socio-political contexts (1998:323).

This could be true, though it is also very possible that the neo-Breton xenolect would stabilize over time and, if learned by enough people over several generations, would simply go its own way, no longer a xenolect, but simply the way 21st century Bretons speak Breton; perhaps it would not be very intelligible to 20th. c. native

speakers of Breton, but neither would it be comprehensible to French monolinguals.

Language ideology among the Breton people (in the 20th c.). Long accustomed to a functional and status differentiation between French as the H(igh) and Breton as the L(ow) language, this diglossic relationship (Timm 1980) was scarcely contested by the mass of the Breton speaking population, though arguably attitudes about Breton pejorated at an increasing rate as the century progressed through and beyond WW II. The efforts of the literati, outlined above, to maintain and promote the language began finding wide public acceptance in the 1960s, but probably did not obtain adherence of noteworthy numbers of people (mainly younger generations) until the late 1970s and early 1980s.

At the turn of the 21st c. popular support among the middle classes for the promotion of Breton in the schools has become widespread. Working class Bretons seem distinctly less interested, while the older generations—including the great bulk of native Breton speakers—mainly cleave to the diglossic model and are faintly bemused by efforts to expand the functionality of neo-Breton. They may also be repelled by it, in part because of the mismatch between their own Breton and the Breton that is now heard in the media and from school children (see below).

Breton Language Pedagogy

Given its position as the L language in diglossia, there was little impetus historically to develop pedagogical materials for the teaching/learning of the language. This lacuna began to be filled in by Hemon and his group in the 1940s and beyond, as rudimentary teach-yourself books began to appear, as well as that indispensable reference tool, a bilingual dictionary. More self-help guides to Breton became available in the 1960s and 1970s, bolstered by the technology then available of cassette tapes. Most of this was material was targeted at adolescents (in terms of content of dialogues) but was probably mainly studied by adults.

In the late 1970s, a new initiative of language promotion was launched—Diwan. This began as a very modest effort on the part of a handful of parents, teachers and students to provide early Breton immersion and then bilingual (Breton-French) instruction for very young children. Over the years, this effort has expanded remarkably, moving from private to semi-public status, and encompassing nearly 3000 students a year in a network of K-12 schools

located throughout Brittany (with several sites now in Paris). Its ideology is premised on the idea of producing accomplished bilinguals; this seems eminently sensible, but is this being achieved?

Here is where pedagogical intentions may founder on the shoals of puristic language ideology, for there are non-trivial issues of intelligibility between the variety of Breton being taught and propagated in the school system—the neo-Breton "xenolect" discussed earlier—and the traditional Breton still being spoken by native speakers. (There are similar issues with many of the professional broadcasters.)

This problem is probably familiar to anyone working with the Celtic languages, but it may be more acute for Breton than for Irish or Welsh, inasmuch as the pool of native Breton speakers consists almost exclusively of older people whose attitudes about Breton are very different from those of the young cohorts learning it as a second language. These older speakers accepted the ideology they inherited from their parents and authorities—that Breton was not suitable for wider society, that French was the only language for social and educational advancement. Breton stubbornly remains for them an L language, but with even more restricted functionality here—mainly as the language for conversation and banter with friends and close family of the same generation (or older).
These older cohorts of speakers who should, ideally, serve as community resources for learners aspiring to improve and perfect their Breton, remain instead outside the circle of pedagogy, which is, for its part, largely closed and self-perpetuating. There is probably self-exclusion by the native speakers from the process too: given the privileging of the academic world, in the eyes of a post-peasantry (which many of the older speakers represent), they are likely to judge their native Breton to be not as "good" as what the children now learn in school.

Still, it might be argued, languages change and the neo-Breton that is emerging from the school children will simply be the Breton of the future, and one should not worry overly whether or not this version of Breton is comprehensible by older speakers, many of whom will not live long into the 21st century. If enough children of Brittany end up in Diwan or other bilingual schools where they acquire a workable knowledge of neo-Breton, then this is a possible scenario. At present, though, this not the case, as made clear in a poignant film released in Britanny in May 1999, which followed the lives over two or three years of several students who were the first to earn their "bacs" in Breton-medium and bilingual schools. What we see

from that film, unfortunately, is that these young people, deeply committed to Breton, find it difficult to maintain social relationships in that language, in large measure because they are so diffusely scattered through the population of Brittany. Yet, ironically, encounters with native Breton speakers are scarcely more productive (linguistically) than with French monolinguals.

Balance Sheet

It is altogether too easy for outsiders to critique the well-meaning and indeed heroic efforts of language activists in Brittany (and in other Celtic countries) to restore and promote their heritage language, and I wish to make clear that any observations I make here or elsewhere are meant only in a most positive way. There have been both benefits and losses in the construction and propagation of neo-Breton over the past century. These will be briefly described here.

Benefits. The benefits of the development of neo-Breton are several: it affords a means of communicating in Breton across traditional dialect areas; at least this is true of the written variety. It has acquired symbolic value as a marker of Breton identity, and has helped eradicate the centuries-old self-stigmatization of Breton by its native speakers. As part of this, some sectors of the public domain, previously closed to Breton, have opened up. This is truest of education; Breton presence on TV and radio are more than in the past, but still not great. The re-worked lexicon, though still too puristic, has nonetheless brought Breton into the modern world, as has the creation of a substantial secular literature.

Losses. The linking of a divergent koiné variety of Breton with a movement of linguistic restoration and the establishment of a an elitist Breton literary tradition has had several consequences:
(i) The very existence of the new prestige variety further stigmatized the vernaculars, a double inferiorization effect, which may have influenced more people to rely on French; this was happening before, but the process accelerated after the Second World War.
(ii) It further distanced the native speaker population from the high variety of the language. Many older native speakers claim, with some testiness, not to be able to understand neo-Breton.
(iii) It meant that language planning was entirely in the hands of a select few intellectuals, highly motivated, but also with a political and ideological agenda; in a way this could be called a self-appointed language-planning oligarchy. Many at the core of the early movement were not native speakers of the language (Hemon,

Taldir, Meavenn, Mordiern, Mordrelle).
(iv) The language moved from a rural to an urban basis in terms of whose perspectives and whose interests would be encoded in the emerging, enriched lexicon. This is not surprising of course, and indeed, was needed if Breton were to be recognized as a language of European, if not international, scope. However, what was downplayed, or benignly ignored, in the forging of the new variety was much of the richness of the vernaculars' expressive repertoire—idioms, proverbs, sayings, riddles, salutations, address terms, invectives. Consider, for example, such idioms as *Hennez a zo digor e skrin* 'He's hungry' or *Uhel eo an avel gantañ* 'He's arrogant'. While certain ones were incorporated, the majority were forgotten, overlooked, or excluded. Curiously, certain commonplace turns of phrase were reformulated as Breton translations of French models, e.g., *Devez mat!* ('Good day!') *Aotrou* ('Sir'), *Itron* ('Madam'), *Dimezell* ('Mademoiselle'); *Aoutrounez hag Itronezed* ('Gentlemen & Ladies' [cf. French *Messieurs et Madames*])

Moreover, in every society, the universal aspects of human existence are to be found, and we find them commented on in such expressive language as proverbs and sayings. These are generally readily comprehended in translation, and it is not uncommon to find quite parallel expressions of this genre across languages and cultures. Thus, it would have benefited new generations of learners of Breton had more figurative expressions been incorporated into updated versions of Breton grammars and dictionaries. There are pedagogical reasons for so doing: often the sayings are rhymed, and this may facilitate the learning process. Perhaps originators of sayings were aware on some level that rhyming could assist children in learning the values and perspectives contained within them. There are also linguistic lessons in sayings for a learner of Breton, which shares with the other Celtic languages a complex morphophonemic system in its initial consonant mutations, for it is likely that repetition of proverbs and sayings provided juvenile learners easily remembered models for these mutations; their repetition could do the same for adult learners.

Conclusion

Language ideologies in Brittany in the past century have promoted an emphasis on a form of Breton, the one currently being taught as a second language, which is in many ways quite different from the native, spoken forms of the language. Deliberately constructed to avoid any appearance of French influence, the teaching of neo-Breton has produced new cohorts of speakers who do not share

many of the same expressive and creative resources with the native speakers; a sort of linguistic dissonance is the result when neo- and paleo-speakers attempt to engage in conversation. I have suggested that more attention might have been paid, and might still be paid, in the construction of grammars and dictionaries to some traditional genres in vernacular forms of the language—e.g., conversational styles that incorporate more idioms, proverbs, and sayings to help provide a bridge between the native and neo Breton speakers. The conversational and age gap between younger and older speakers may already be so great as to render the crossing of this bridge impracticable or impossible. An unanswered question (and unanswerable at present) is whether or not the neo-speakers will-become sufficiently numerous to propagate their own version of the language and to promote, through time, its further elaboration as a set of vernaculars as expressive and creative as the ones that are being currently being lost.

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Retrospective
NAACLT - the first decade

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This year marks the 10th anniversary of the establishment of NAACLT in 1995 and the 10th year of publication of *JCLL*. It seems appropriate as we enter into our second decade as an organization, to review the progress and growth of NAACLT, both to provide a record of the early years, and to serve as a basis for future planning and development.

Compared with most professional organizations, the membership base of NAACLT is unique in that it includes both academic professionals and teachers in community-based language learning settings. Some members are professionally engaged with Celtic languages on a full time basis in academic institutions, while others teach their languages part time in addition to primary academic duties in other fields; still others teach their languages as an avocation, often on a volunteer basis, while engaged in other careers. This range of backgrounds reflects the realities of the context in which the organization has developed. It is in the nature of Celtic language teaching in North America that much of the language learning activity, particularly the learning of the modern spoken languages, takes place outside of official educational domains. Many who undertake the study of Celtic languages do so, at least initially, on their own or in small study groups without formal instruction; this was even more so a decade ago than it is today. There are a number of credit-bearing university-level courses available in Irish (although the focus of some of these may be more on the literary than the spoken language), but considerably fewer in Welsh and Scottish Gaelic, and virtually none in Breton, Manx or Cornish.[1] Although the number of university courses on the modern spoken languages is growing, classes are more often taught on a non-

[1] For a survey of the available resources for the study of Celtic languages, see the series of articles published in *JCLL*, volumes 7-9. Volume 7 includes articles on Welsh and Scottish Gaelic, volume 8 on Irish and Breton, and volume 9 on Manx and Cornish.