Breton: A Brief Overview

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A Map of Multilingual Europe

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Introduction

Breton (in French, / b̯rø 'tɔ̃/) is a Celtic language spoken in the region of lower Brittany in western France. While today one of the official regional languages recognized by the French state, Breton, alongside other regional languages[1] in France, has experienced a fairly tumultuous history of linguistic suppression and been the victim of centralist national ideals which suppressed linguistic diversity in France following the French revolution. Recent language revitalization efforts have attempted to reverse the chain of events set in place by centuries of nationalist propaganda, however, these efforts have largely fallen short, and today Breton qualifies on a number of scales as an endangered[2] language (Broudic 2009, Ethnologue 2021).

Brief History

From approximately 500 BCE, Celtic peoples began settling the lands of Armorica, which constituted the portion of Gaul between the Seine and the Loire rivers, including the Brittany Peninsula. Migration during the Middle Ages ultimately pushed Bretons out of present-day Great Britain and into modern day *Bretagne*, where it still is taught, spoken and practiced today. However, the sociolinguistic situation of Breton in 2021 and its dwindling number of speakers is a poor reflection of the strength, dominance and prosperity that the Celtic people represented in the Middle Ages.

The number of speakers of Breton today remains somewhat ambiguous. In 2016, the French government estimated that 304,000 Breton speakers resided in France, while the *Office publique de la langue Bretonne* estimate a more conservative 225,000 speakers of Breton. Furthermore, the number of speakers of Breton reportedly declined from more than 1 million around 1950 to ca. 200,000 at the beginning of the 21st century, according to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages, thereby classifying Breton as "severely endangered." Differing approximations of speaker status is a hurdle that is often encountered when studying the sociolinguistic situation of a language, particularly an endangered language. When confronted with the potential of language death, are sociolinguists or government reports more apt to attribute speaker-ness more easily? Particularly in the context of research, no singular methodology exists with which speaker-ness can be qualified. I am inclined to evoke the questions that I posed in my previous paper: "Who or what constitutes a 'speaker'? What proficiency is necessary to 'speak a language fluently'? Who has the power to determine one's language status? The fluidity of salient terms such as *fluent, native, proficient* and *speaker* represent constant negotiations in the domain of sociolinguistics and render broad-spectrum statistics research immensely difficult. Additionally, other limitations, such as the methods used for gathering statistics and contacting speakers may account for some inconsistencies across data reporting" (McInerney, *Linguistic Diversity in France*). In the context of both reports, it should be noted that neither provided an explicit definition for 'speaker'.

Phonology and Linguistic Features of Breton

Breton belongs to the Celtic language family and it is one of the six Celtic languages spoken today. It shares with Welsh and Cornish an identical basic vocabulary and with all other Celtic languages the grammatical use of initial consonantic variation, which is used mainly to denote gender.

Linguistic features of Breton

In regard to phonology, we can list several key features of Breton. It has an average consonant inventory and large vowel quality inventory, as well as average consonant-vowel ratio (Ternes 1970; Bothorel 1982). According to Hemon (2007), it has 30 consonants and 11 vowels (presented on Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 respectively). Breton has all common consonants and no uncommon ones. In Breton, each letter (or group of letters, such as ch, gn, c'h, etc.) generally corresponds respectively to a single sound (Hemon 2007).

stops   [p b t d c ɟ k g]
nasals   [m n ɲ ŋ]
laterals   [l ʎ]
rolled   [r ʁ]
fricatives [f v s z ʃ ʒ ç x ɣ h ɦ]
semivowels [w ɥ j]

Fig. 1. Breton consonants (adapted from Hemon 2007: 70).

Breton vowels have a few characteristics that should be noted. Every unstressed vowel is short, while many – but not all – stressed vowels are long (Hemon 2007). High vowels do not differ noticeably in quality regardless of being short or long; however, the low vowel has two qualities: [a] is closed when long in a monosyllable and open when short. Moreover, Breton has no low front rounded vowels (Ternes 1970; Bothorel 1982).

FRONT   ROUNDED   BACK
high   i   y   u
high mid   e   ø   o
mid   ɛ   œ   ɔ
low   a   ɑ

Fig. 2. Breton vowels (adapted from Hemon 2007: 74).

Breton has a complex syllable structure (Ternes 1970; Bothorel 1982). It also has fixed word stress on a penultimate syllable (Ternes 1970; Bothorel 1982). In regard to sentence stress, only the principal words of the sentence are stressed, i.e. nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, pronouns, and conjugated prepositions (Hemon 2007).

Intonation in Breton depends on stress. It is the stressed syllables which control the elevation and the lowering of the tone, with unstressed syllables always being pronounced in a lower tone (Hemon 2007).

There are also several syntactic features of Breton which should be mentioned. Word order in Breton is described as SVO (Ternes 1970; Press 1986: 188; Schapansky 2000). The order of adjective and noun is reported to be noun-adjective (Press 1986: 187; Ternes 1970: 220, 226), while the order of numeral and noun is numeral-noun (Press 1986: 90; Ternes 1970: 232, 229-231). Moreover, double negation is reportedly used in Breton (Ternes 1970: 284; Stephens 1993: 376).

Language Policy in France : The status of Breton Today

The French Republic acknowledges only one official language, officially designated in its constitution. With over 267 million speakers worldwide ("*What are the most spoken languages?*"), the French language has been a historical symbol of *la République* since the end of the French Revolution in 1799, and was often weaponized by the government to ensure homogeny and a sense of national belonging, particularly in regions which had been reclaimed by France during the Revolution and in which languages other than French were prevalent. The use of regional languages, including Breton, were not only indicative of lower class status, but were also considered a social and economic determent, and speakers of these languages viewed as 'opting out' of collective efforts to harmonize the different populations which constituted the new French national territory. Regional languages were removed from schools, public spaces and cultural spheres in order to homogenize the population and foster collective cultural capital that could be easily monitored and render political dissent more apparent.

In 1951, the *loi Dexionne* authorized the reintroduction of Breton in schools, however, this is largely disregarded as a true language revitalization effort and more as an disorganized response to populations seeking the right to transmit their cultural heritage within the context of the French school system. While other language revitalization efforts began to take hold in the early 1960s, it was not until 1990 that French citizens saw a full scale effort to integrate bilingual or Breton instruction in public as well as private institutions. Today, approximately 13,000 children receive at least a portion of their schooling in Breton (*Office publique de la langue Bretonne*). However, the lack of comprehensive policy for regional languages in France continues to contribute to the decline of Breton, whose staggering figures provide little promise for the language's future if overturn in policy (such as the ratification of the Charter of European Regional Minority Languages) does not come to fruition.

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[1] For the purposes of this paper, "Regional languages" are defined as the languages traditionally spoken in the country of France prior to French. Migrant, or minority languages, as well as languages spoken in French territories are not included under this definition. French sign language is not recognized as a regional language or *langue de France* but as a "*langue à part entière*".

[2] The report commissioned by the Ethnologue makes reference to its use of Lewis and Simon's 2010 Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS), a 13 point scale categorizing a language's status, from widely used to extinct. However, at no point on the scale is the word "endangered" employed, leaving some room for questioning in the consistency of terminology and methodology used in the report.

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