

Revivalists and native speakers in Brittany and in Ireland: a paradoxical misunderstanding

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Present-day media are full of alarmist articles deploring the fate of the rapidly diminishing number of languages spoken around the world. We are regularly informed that out of the 6,000 languages that are used today a vast majority have a small number of speakers and that they are doomed to “die” in the years to come.

ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

Language shifts are triggered by economic and political change. They can be very slow and nearly imperceptible, as has been the case for centuries in the traditional rural civilisation that prevailed over most of Western Europe. They can also be very sudden, which is what happened when age-old peasant cultures gave way to a growing urbanisation. A language is always tied to what, from our viewpoint, is an “institution”, that is “a function that is stabilized in the social order, with common rules for a particular use”. A human society is made up of the diversity and the hierarchical order of its institutions (Le Dû/Le Berre 1996). When a so defined institution disappears, so does the language that expressed it. As the limits of the peasants’ small confined world crumbled, their languages followed suit, sometimes very swiftly, but also with a possible delay of one or several generations. The numerous peasant communities that constituted small institutions in rural Europe have ceased to exist in the course of the last century, giving way to the larger institutions that form the modern State. The term “endangered language” is ambiguous; as it implies that a language has a life of its own. If it is not heard any more, it means that its former users have given up speaking it because the institution that kept them together has vanished, not that it has “suffered” and “died”, in the biological sense of these words! Nevertheless, the biological metaphor is employed extensively in the defence of “endangered languages”. In some circles the latter defence is put on a par with the fight to preserve “endangered species”, so paralleling the defence of animals or vegetable breeds, preferably in exotic surroundings. The *Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages* of Salem (Oregon)¹ has among its goals to “assist indigenous communities in their struggle for cultural linguistic survival”. The *Hans Rausing Endangered languages documentation program* is a London-based organization whose members record speakers of lesser-used languages and help students acquire the necessary qualifications to do so. In France, the *Fondation Chirac* harbours a programme called *Sorosoro* “so that the languages of the world may prosper”. The focus, once again, is on so-called indigenous people,² defined as such from a European perspective: one notes that the former French

¹ <http://www.livingtongues.org/>

² Both sites show pictures of autochthonous persons from all over the world.

President was the promoter of the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, dedicated to what he termed “les arts premiers” i.e. ‘arts of the first peoples, or tribal art’. These structures generously insist upon the need to help the people who speak those languages to keep them “alive”, along with their cultural and medical lore. All three aim at resisting the levelling out of cultures around the world.

UNESCO’s latest edition of its *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger* (Moseley 2010) can be read on the net.³ It divides endangered languages into six categories:

1 — safe: language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted (not included in the Atlas);

2 — vulnerable: most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home);

3 — definitely endangered: children no longer learn the language as a mother tongue in the home;

4 — severely endangered: language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves;

5 — critically endangered: the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently

6 — extinct: there are no speakers left.

Breton sits in the 4th category and Irish in the 3rd, although the Breton native speakers are by far the most numerous (Broudic 2009).

THE SITUATION IN EUROPE

In present-day Europe, most non-official languages suffer from a similar attrition in a rapidly changing world. The political treatment of the question is complex, as the States have various attitudes towards the languages which are —or used to be — spoken on their soils. In some European countries, like Italy and particularly Spain, regional languages are given more and more official recognition. The Council of Europe — not to be confused with the European Union — adopted in 1992 a treaty called *The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (ECRML) in favour of the protection and promotion of languages traditionally used on the Continent. These are not all in the same situation. Some are the national language of another country, like Swedish in Finland or German in Northern-Italy or in Belgium. Others, like Irish or Breton, are not used outside their traditional limits. Irish, although its social position is weak, is the official language of an independent country and an official language inside the European Union, while Breton has never had any official recognition. France signed, but did not ratify, the European Charter, on the ground that French is the official language of the Republic according to the Constitution.⁴ An article, however, been added in 2008 stating that “Regional languages belong to the heritage of France”.⁵ These received in fact some acknowledgment in that they are taught in a few bilingual primary schools; a number of secondary teachers of

³ <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/>

⁴ The first paragraph “The language of the Republic is French” was added by the Constitutional Act of June 25th, 1992.

⁵ “Les langues régionales appartiennent au patrimoine de la France.”

Basque, Breton, Catalan, Corsican, Occitan and Creole are being recruited, and the Universities deliver degrees in those languages.

Both Irish and Breton are spoken by a tiny fraction of the population: an estimated 170,000 for Breton and 20,000 for Irish. Are the people who use them different from their monoglot fellow-citizens, do they feel they are different and are they treated differently?

THE NATIVE IRISH SPEAKERS AS LANGUAGE KEEPERS

The area where Irish is spoken has gone on receding for centuries, with increased speed since the mid-nineteenth century Famine. Census figures indicate that in 1851, about one and a half million people spoke Irish on a daily basis: in 1921, the number had dramatically dropped to 250,000 and in 1971 to 70,568! Whatever has been tried to ensure the survival of the language, the decline has led to its being confined to the present day minute areas still considered *Gaeltachtaí*.⁶ Inside these very limits, daily use of the language has been reduced dramatically, what with the intrusion of television and the arrival of English-speaking families.

Gaelic has a place apart in European history, as it has the most ancient vernacular literature in Europe. The Gaelic society has linguistically assimilated invaders, from Vikings to Normans, until the fatal “Flight of the Earls” which marked in 1607 the end of the Gaelic political order. From then on, Irish became the language of poor peasants. In spite of the persistence of a literary production, its normalised form was forgotten over the years. The shift to English grew dramatically after the Famine, as emigration became the major way to survival. In 1883, when the Gaelic League was founded by Douglas Hyde and others, there were no more than six Irish-language books in print in the country! The new independent Irish government solemnly declared in 1922 Irish to be the official language of the new State, but English has in fact always been its working language.

In 1956, the government realized that the last Irish speaking survival pockets were on the verge of extinction. *Roinn na Gaeltachta* ‘The Department of the Gaeltacht’ was created, drawing a border between the scattered *Gaeltachtaí* areas where Irish was surmised to be the main everyday language and the rest of the country — in fact the major part of it — which is paradoxically called the *Galltacht*, ‘the foreign language area’. The government aimed at stopping emigration which was the plague those areas. Gaeltacht people were offered grants for raising their children in Irish, for sending them to University, for building their houses, etc. That could be considered unfair, especially in the the Meath Gaeltacht:

Béarlóirí (na Mí)! Bhí mé ag caint ar an dream seo, bhí Gaeilge acu chomh maith linn fhéin, ach san am céanna bhí muide ag fáil chúig phunt as, ach ní rabhadar seo ag fáil chúig phunt ar bith. Chuir sé sin an dearg-ghráin acu

⁶ *Comprehensive linguistic study of the use of Irish in the Gaeltacht: principal findings and recommendations* the department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht affairs, 2007.

an Ghaeilge a labhairt agus bhí neart Gaeilge acu, fiú amháin tá sí inniu acu. (Ó Giollagáin 1999, 169-170).⁷

It is clear that the native Irish speakers, who were not ethnically apart from their fellow-citizens, were made, willy-nilly, the guardians of the ancient language. In an independent Ireland, the ruling classes considered Irish to be the symbol of a glorious national cultural past that had to be “preserved”. Was the symbolic status of the language for the good of citizens? The economic plight of the impoverished and emigration-plagued western Gaeltachtaí was virtually ignored. It was not only in the 1970s that a serious effort was made to bring jobs into Connemara. This considerably slowed the emigration rate, but also brought back from Britain local families who now were English speaking. This boosted an incipient language shift and before long most parents in the Gaeltacht began rearing their children in English. The Celtic Tiger boom has brought many non-Irish speakers to settle in the region, and an English speaking way of life has grown to be more or less the norm.

In 1981, The film-maker Bob Quinn and the journalist Desmond Fennell, both active in the struggle for the Irish language — they had moved from Dublin to live in Connemara around 1968 in order to take an active part in the revival movement —, made a film entitled *Last Days of the Gaeltacht*.

BRETON AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The wide territory where Breton is spoken is called Lower Brittany, which includes the Finistère département as well as the Western halves of Côtes-d’Armor and Morbihan. The linguistic border, which has moved very little during the past centuries, represents the ultimate limit of the retreat of Celtic before romance dialects, a movement which extended through the centuries under the pressure of cities like Angers and Nantes until it was stabilized without much change for hundreds of years. In the past half century the use of Breton deteriorated inside those limits, mainly since the Second World War.

At the end of the 18th century, large regions of France did not speak French, but various languages (Occitan, Catalan, Basque, Corsican, Francoprovençal, Flemish, German, Breton as well as many French dialects). All in all, according to Grégoire (Gazier 1969) perhaps only 3 million out of a population of 25 millions spoke what might be considered to be standard French. During the old regime, the kings had felt no urge to unite their subjects. The Republic, on the contrary, turned their former subjects into free citizens who must as such be able to understand the new laws. The notion of unity went very far: Republicans created the metric system, reformed the calendar, put an end to the age-old Provinces and even planned to change the time divisions! Language unification was a consequence of that attitude: the peasants’ minds, they thought, were imprisoned within the limits of their local languages: all citizens —now members of the same institution —were to be able to communicate... Grégoire (Gazier 188), the very man who fought against slavery, and who emancipated the Jews, wanted to end the use of the local languages and to teach French to the entire population of France (Grégoire 1794). He is

⁷ The Meath English speakers! I was talking about those people, they had Irish as much as we had, but at the same time we were getting five pounds for it, and they weren’t getting a bit of those five pounds. It made them hate to speak Irish, and they had a lot of it, even to this day (my translation).

considered a hero... except by minority language activists, for whom he is the devil incarnate.

THE CONTRASTING IMAGES OF THE BRETON LANGUAGE

Breton has been a written language since the Middle Ages, being mostly used for religious purposes from the 15th century on. But it has never been the language of power: the Dukes had their capital city in Nantes and then Rennes and French has always been the language of the Duchy.

Breton has played historically contrasting roles in France. It first carries the deep rooted image of an unintelligible language, of a gibberish: the French word *bredouiller* 'to splutter', 'to mumble' literally means 'to talk like a Breton'... and as far south as Nice 'to stutter' is *bretuna* 'to speak Breton'! On the opposite, it has also long been considered to be a survival of Gaulish, the ancient language of France. As late as 1948, the Larousse dictionary defined the adjective Bretonnant: *Se dit de la partie de la Bretagne et des Bretons qui ont conservé leur ancien langage, leurs moeurs primitives* 'defines the part of Brittany and the Bretons who have kept their ancient language, their primitive customs'. The author used here the word "primitif" as meaning "primeval", not "primitive" in the pejorative sense, so that ulterior editions only kept *qui ont conservé leur langue* 'who have kept their language'. This is a vestige of Celtomania, a movement that insisted on the importance of Gaulish, and thus of Breton, in the making of the French nation and even of its language, as asserted in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. This view lasted all along the 18th down to the fall of Napoleon in 1815. Even later on, the history of France at school started with the memory of *Nos ancêtres les Gaulois* 'our ancestors the Gauls'.

The modern all-pervading image of Breton has only been introduced in the course of the 19th century. A new theory, Bretonism, grew out of the work of historians like La Borderie and linguists like Joseph Loth (1880), who considered Breton as a language wholly imported from Great-Britain into an all but empty Armorica from the 5th to the 7th centuries. The ideological consequence of this view is felt to this very day: Bretons have the image of an alien population inside France, as their language is classified among the British insular languages. The Catholic Church in France accepted no compromise with the Republic until the end of the 19th century, and Conservatives presented Brittany as a religious stronghold, a rampart against the materialistic anti-Christian republican ideas: from a stubborn backward race, Bretons became immovably faithful Christians. Even though today scholars tend to think that Breton is at least partly Gaulish and that Armorica was not as empty as had been imagined when the insular immigrants settled there, the bretonist ideology still prevails among the public at large.

A POLITICAL USE OF THE BRETON LANGUAGE

In the 19th century, the conservative classes in Lower-Brittany were in favour of the defence of Breton — not for their own usage, but for the working classes — while the Republicans insisted on the importance of acquiring a good command of the national language to get on in life. For the latter — often native Breton speakers themselves —, French was the key to emancipation and Breton a yoke used by the conservatives and the Catholic Church to keep them in their place: it was *la langue des curés* 'the priests' language'.

On the liberal side, many moves have been made since the 19th century to foster respect towards the Breton language, or at least to do justice to the Breton children whose mother tongue was not French, by teaching them to read and write in their native language. One of the first was a *Pétition pour les langues provinciales au Corps législatif de 1870* by Count Charencey, the celticist Henri Gaidoz and Charles de Gaulle, the general's uncle! Many political groups have tried to introduce dozens of bills into the French Parliament in favour of the teaching of regional languages. Only one bill was finally passed, the Deixonne law, in 1951. It allowed some teaching of Breton, Basque, Occitan and Catalan outside the normal curriculum. This type of action became outdated a few years after the Second World War, as most parents had already started bringing up their children in French. From then on, regional languages were defended for their own sake, as ancient monuments to be preserved, until a proposition under President Mitterrand's call for a "*réparation historique*" i.e. a "historical atonement" of the wrong perpetrated by the republican school system against the local languages... The national school, glorified by the left for having emancipated the working classes, was now accused of misbehaviour.

A contradictory situation developed: the staunch defenders of Breton were educated French speakers, while the native speakers of Breton were busy learning French. During the 20th century, the Church insisted on using Breton for the teaching of catechism against the will of the government, while paradoxically forbidding its use in its schools, conforming to the model that applied in the State schools. When Breton transmission to children ceased after the Second World War, the Church followed suit around 1950 and turned entirely to French. In fact, most pupils, who had learnt to read and write in French at school, considered written Breton as unintelligible as the Latin prayers they had been taught in Church.

The older generation had read books in Breton: my grandfather, born in 1870, almost knew by heart the 10,000 verses of *Buhez ar pevar mab Hemon* 'The four sons of Aymon' published in 1848 in Morlaix, but he also perused anything in French that came his way, which was scant: an occasional paper, a text book... But his children read whatever they could lay their hands on in French, a feat, as books were a rarity. The quality of written French used by Breton speakers was generally good, without misspellings, as the language had come to them in its written form. It is an established fact that academic standards were — and still are — higher in Lower Brittany than in adjacent Higher Brittany, where the local romance dialect interfered with standard French.

BOOK-IRISH AND NEO-BRETON

The revival in 19th century Ireland and the establishment of Irish as an official language in the 1920s induced standardisation of the language: new words had to be coined, the grammar was to be united and dialects — the living language — were to be replaced by a normalised standard. Most teachers were native English speakers, and for decades Irish was frequently taught as if it were a dead language. Native speakers often resented the type of Irish language they were taught in school: they were sometimes blamed for "mistakes" arising from their own dialect usage. There was a striking contrast between them, who felt Irish as a hindrance, and Dublin civil servants who used it to their own benefit.

In Brittany, some people had started an interest for Breton for its own sake in the 19th century. One of the main proponents of the movement was Viscount Hersart de la Villemarqué, whose *Barzas Breiz* was published in 1939. Following his master Le

Gonidec, he insisted on “purifying” the language, trying to do away with French words and replacing them with archaic Breton ones or even with Welsh loans, like *alarc’h* for ‘swan’ replacing *sin* or *sign* (from French *cygne*). That puristic line was followed by many others, the most influent being François Vallée and René Le Roux (alias Meven Mordiern). These two published in 1932 a dictionary full of newly coined words. As none of them was a native speaker, they felt free to treat the language at their discretion, without sensing the ridiculous (e.g.: *broz-berr* ‘short skirt’ replacing... *kilt!*), or totally inappropriate use of some terms (e.g.: *douari* ‘to earth up potatoes’ came to replace *interi* ‘to bury people’ just because the second came from the French word *enterrer!*).

A small group of nationalist activists had launched after the First World War a political movement *Breiz Atao* ‘Brittany for ever’, flirting with the Nazis even before the following world war. But most did not come from Breton-speaking families, and the language they used was artificial. They despised the native Breton speakers for being “weak” and speaking a language full of borrowed French words... One of these activists, Roparz Hemon, a secondary school English teacher and native French speaker, started a magazine called *Gwalarn*, as a literary publication of *Breiz Atao*. His goal was to turn Breton into a modern language on a par with any other national language in Europe. He published Breton translations of some major European literary texts as a way to modernize the language so as to turn it into the dignified official language of an independent Brittany to come. A unified spelling was established in July 1941 under the pressure of Dr Weisgerber, a German celticist who was in charge as a *Sonderführer* of the Breton nationalist movement in occupied Brittany... The influence of these groups has been very small indeed, but their collaboration with the Germans during the Occupation years has induced among traditional speakers a long-lasting sense of mistrust for Breton language militants.

PARITARY AND DISPARITARY LEVELS

People who are raised speaking one of the major international languages share the view that theirs is the “normal” situation: on the contrary, it seems that diglossia (Ferguson 1950) far from being unusual is, in fact, universal. We all share at least two levels of speech, one in a familiar context, when addressing family and friends — the *paritary* level —, the other in formal situations — the *disparitary* level (Le Dû/Le Berre 1994). This is true in all societies, whatever their language. Although French is probably one of the most unified languages that is spoken today in the Western world, learners soon notice that ordinary everyday speech in France is rather different from the disparitary language level they have been taught in school. French monoglots — the majority — share two levels which are dissimilar both in grammar and lexicon: The formal *As-tu vu ma voiture?* ‘Did you see my new car?’ becomes *T’as vu ma bagnole?*, with no inversion of the subject and the use of a different word (Le Dû/Le Berre 1995). The situation could be compared to that of the Greek opposition mentioned by Ferguson between formal *katharévoussa* and everyday *demotiki*. Some French politicians know how to play with these levels: if a minister says *on va vous trouver du boulot* ‘we’ll find you jobs’, he stands —or pretends to stand — on the side of the unemployed person by using the familiar word *boulot* instead of *travail*. This subtle game has developed in modern France probably as a replacement of the play between school French and the regional languages abandoned in the course of the past century: half a century ago, the two levels were standard French and whatever people spoke at home: a local French dialect like Norman or Picard or another language like

Provençal or Corsican. It still functions that way in the French West-Indies with Creole. The French situation is unique in that all continental Frenchmen nowadays share identical language registers.

Since the Revolution, as we already said, all French people share a common law, while their race, religion or political ideas and thus their home language belong to the private individual sphere. In Breton-speaking Brittany fifty years ago, things were quite clear: French was on the disparitary level, while Breton was on the paritary one. When parents shifted from Breton to French, their children were deprived of that paritary level: they still understood Breton, but they did not speak it except when addressing their elders. They replaced Breton by a paritary level of their own, which at first was a kind of French heavily loaded with Breton pronunciation and vocabulary, just as had happened in Ireland with Hiberno-English, though it did not last as long as the latter. Their children or grandchildren adopted the general French diglossic pair and have thus lost nearly all trace of the ancient speech.

THE CONTEMPORARY REVIVALIST MOVEMENTS

During the Ethnic revival years of the 1970s, a sudden popular interest arose in Brittany as elsewhere in the Western world in the defence of local languages and customs. Evening classes flourished, theatrical groups began playing in Breton, books were published. Music played a great part in that movement: the new notion of “Celtic” music became popular, giving rise to the establishment of links with the other Celtic countries. This movement of a new kind was led by young people from urban surroundings who generally had no Breton. In 1977 the *Diwan* private schools movement was launched, on the model of the Basque *Ikastolak* which had started in 1957 in the Basque country in urban Spanish-speaking surroundings as part of a movement of resistance against the Franco regime in Spain. That model spread all over Europe and beyond. It is a matter of reflexion that it also rooted in Ireland in 1973, a country where the teaching of Irish had been compulsory since 1928! The *Gaelscoileanna* developed Irish-medium schools at primary and at post-primary level outside the Gaeltacht, mainly in the major cities. The general idea was to use the traditional language as the sole medium of teaching, following the immersion method, and relying on a strong involvement of parents. It was in fact the same technique — in a softer way — as that which had formerly been used by the traditional schools to teach the children the national language. All in all, however, only a minute percentage —less than 2 %— of Breton children benefit from those possibilities. The blame for language change had been put on the school, so that the promoters of these alternative schools believe, or do as if they believe, that they were going to reverse the shift. There is however a major difference between the two situations: the local language is not, and has never been, a vital necessity, and there is no place outside the school where it now is the normal medium of communication. School immersion is not societal immersion. A notable factor is that most parents do not speak the language their children are taught in: they insist that being bilingual is beneficial to the child’s development, and the parents’ involvement in the activities of the school is good for them. Suffice it to see the photographs displayed on the sites advertising those schools — young modern-looking smiling parents who are so glad to see their kids in schools where their children will be so happy. The fact that classes are less crowded in those schools than in the national ones is probably not alien to their achievement: a poll led by the French paper *Le Figaro* shows in 2009 the *Diwan* secondary

boarding school in Carhaix (Finistère) had the best results (second only to le Sacré coeur lycée in Beaune out of 1930 schools) for the baccalauréat, the leaving examination of the French secondary school. Some critics argue that these schools are in fact made for an élite, for children who come from a culturally favoured background.

Does that mean that they are going to revive Breton as a spoken language?

COMPARISON BETWEEN BRETON AND IRISH NATIVES SPEAKERS

I spent the years 1960-62 in Galway, with frequent stays in Connemara to learn Irish on the ground, and I noticed marked differences between Gaeltacht people and city dwellers. The opposition could be actually *seen*, as Connemara men used to dress in traditional *báinín* (white flannel) clothes. To my surprise, a shop girl in Galway exclaimed “O! Natives!” when she saw a series of pictures I took of Indreabhán people at work. I do not imply there was some sort of apartheid, but the distinction was obvious: the Gaeltacht people were in fact Irish speaking peasants or fishermen whereas Galway people were English speaking city dwellers.

The comparison with my home country was illuminating: Breton speakers at that time were also mainly country people, generally looked down upon as peasants the way peasants have been from times immemorial, no matter what language they spoke. Peasants spoke differently from city dwellers, and their speech was a social marker, termed “dialect, patois, jargon, lingo etc.”. The fact that their language was utterly alien like Breton added up to that essential opposition. It is obvious that for native speakers of Breton or Irish, French and English are on the disparitary side whereas Breton and Irish are on the paritary one. Whatever has been done in favour of the survival of the language has never worked, because there was no conflict as long as each register functioned in its own place.

The main difference between Breton speakers and native Irish speakers arises from the political context. My family and all the native Breton speakers I knew felt they were French, i.e. citizens of the Republic like any other Frenchman. This is the result of many factors like the national school which instilled into the majority of the population of France notions of national history, geography and French language — it created in fact a national feeling — of the military service and of the wars against the Germans in 1870, 1914 and 1939. It is to be noted that there is a word for Frenchmen in Breton *Fransijen* which has no singular: *ar Fransijen* ‘the French’ — and the Bretons belonged to that group — fought on the side of *an Anglijen* ‘the English’⁸ against *an Almanted* ‘the Germans’. On the other side, Breton speakers talked of *Breiz-Izel* ‘Lower-Brittany’ to describe their country, especially in songs, but they only felt at home there, while Brittany itself was a mere geographical notion: there was no contradiction between being Breton and French, the first was on the paritary level and the second was in the disparitary or official register.

Breton was the everyday vernacular — used at work on the farm or at sea, and also, on a formal level, in Church. It was the language of the home, or rather one of them: some would use it with their parents, or with their grandparents while they spoke either French or Breton to their siblings, or both. The situation was very intricate: two friends of mine spoke nothing but Breton at home and among themselves. When the three of us met, one of them would start talking to his brother in Breton, but when his eyes met mine, the

⁸ The word *Saoz* pl. *Saozon* ‘English’ is the word used outside the war context.

sentence went on in French without any pause, and I am sure he did not even notice the shift: I was a student, and as such supposed to favour French! It seems that language preference was a part of each individual just like the colour of his hair... No one dreamt of using Breton for any other purpose, or thought he belonged to a minority which had to fight for its rights. Teaching Breton in school was never talked of. The mere thought of learning it at school was considered peculiar: people felt unconsciously that Breton is a language you do not have to learn, but something you grow up with. There had been some Breton lessons given during the war by a language enthusiast, but very few followed them and no one saw any point in that. Some people had heard of Bretons who had sided with the Nazis during the war in order to establish an independent Brittany, but that was something they could not understand, as most people had sided with what they called the “patriotes”, the Resistance movement led by Communists or Gaullists. People were either conservative or left-wing, they voted either “white” or “red”, but they were — definitively and decidedly— citizens of France.

French was the only language used at school. It was the language of the songs you could hear on the radio, in the cinemas and in the dancing halls. It would have been unthought of to court a girl in Breton: dressing in one’s best clothes and speaking French went together. During my early years in Plougrescant, throughout the Second World War, nearly everybody around me spoke Breton all day long, with a few exceptions. As in all diglossic surroundings, the two languages shared the totality of communicative purposes : French was of course spoken to outsiders who had no Breton — war refugees, civil servants — and to some local people who preferred to speak French for various reasons. Anybody could live in that place with no knowledge of the local language, exactly as French people living in Abidjan or Dakar never give a thought to the possibility of learning one of the local languages. That situation was straightforward: French was a language you had to exert much energy to acquire in order to get on in life, while Breton was the innate means of communication you did not have to learn: it was simply there, never to disappear.

Things were different in the Gaeltacht, confined to the poorer Western fringes of Ireland, where education was being given in Irish. We all know the colonial history of Ireland and the discrimination its people suffered from. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Irish speakers had been busy for many years learning English by themselves in hedge schools.⁹ Although the national schools were founded in 1831, some of these hedge schools lasted down to the 1890’s, according to Yolanda Fernández-Suárez (2006). Micil Chonraí (Ó Giollaigáin 1999) gives a direct testimony of this when he talks about his uncle Colm Ó Lupáin, born in 1871:

... fear mór a bhí ann le scríobh, níl mé ag rá gur scríobh sé aon leabhar, ach bhí sé ag scríobh do mhuintir an bhaile agus bhí sé ag léamh dhóibh... agus san am céanna i mBéarla a bhíodh sé ag scríobh. Tá mé siúráilte nach raibh sé in ann aon Ghaeilge a scríobh, mar nuair a bhíodh na múinteoirí

⁹ The Penal laws (1695-1829) had deprived the Irish Roman Catholics of their civil rights, so that many were educated by wandering masters in illegal “hedge schools” whose classes were held in the open or in barns. The children were taught reading, writing and arithmetic through English (sometimes also Latin, Greek and mathematics). They were forbidden to speak Irish: if they did, they had to hang a “tally stick” around their necks and be punished by their parents who often spoke nothing but Irish themselves.

seo ag goil thart ag múineadh, mar a deir siad i mBéarla: the hedge school master, ag goil i bhfolach ag múineadh gur Béarla a bhí acu. [...] sin é a bhí sé a rá nach raibh sé in aon teach scoile ceart ariamh agus gur i mBéarla a bhí sé ag scríobh agus ag léamh... (Ó Giollagáin 1999, 68).¹⁰

In Ireland like in Brittany, it was a vital necessity to get a good grasp of the mainstream language in order to get on in life, eventually emigrate and make a decent living. For nationalist reasons, the new Irish State wanted the ancient language to be honoured and preserved, and the Gaeltachtaí were created in 1926. Teaching in Gaeltacht schools was meant to be entirely in Irish, which was a difficult problem as no tradition existed before in that domain. It seems that the standard was rather low in Connemara, at least if one is to believe the testimony of Micil Chonraí:

Is iomaí gasúr a tháinig amach as an scoil a raibh mise aici agus ní raibh sé in ann a ainm a scríobh agus chaithfidís a bheith ag goil ag an scoil go mbeidís cheithre bliana déag. Cheithre bliana déag de spídiúlacht! (Ó Giollagáin 1999, 73)¹¹

Connemara people often did not know English, or had a very limited knowledge of it, a huge disadvantage, as many of them had to emigrate to England or the United States for work. In 1960 I met young emigrants to Boston who were unable to speak English. They greatly resented this disadvantage. Micil Chonraí bears testimony to that feeling:

Dúirt fear liom an lá cheana nuair a tháinig ina chónaí sa gCondae seo ní raibh focal Béarla aige, ach corrfhocal agus “mé i m’asal,” a deir sé, “agus chuile dhuine ag magadh fúm.” Sé an fáth ar chuir mé an cheist air: bhí sé pósta agus gasúr aige agus nach raibh sé ag labhairt Gaeilge leis na gasúir. “Ó,” a deir sé, “d’fhéadfá a rá nach bhfuilim,” a deir sé, “nó cen fáth a labhróinn,” a deir sé, “tháinig mé aniar anseo gan focal Béarla agam agus mé i m’asal,” a deir sé, “agus chuile dhuine ag magadh fúm.” (Ó Giollagáin 1999, (106-107).¹²

It seemed to me that, although Connemara people were taught through Irish, they kept their ancestor’s attitude towards English, which remained the written language they needed, while Irish remained at the parity level. I have regularly asked my friends in

¹⁰ “...he was very good at writing. I do not say he wrote a book, he wrote for the parish people and he read to them, but in English. I am sure he could not write in Irish, because the hedge school masters, who worked in secret — t’is in English they taught. [...] He had never attended a real school and it is in English he wrote and read... (my translation).

¹¹ Many a child left the school I attended without being able to write his name, and he had to go there up to the age of fourteen. Fourteen years of abuse! (my translation).

¹² A man told me the other day that on arriving in this county [Meath] he had not a word of English but a few words and “I was an ass”, he said, “and everybody made fun of me”. So that I asked him: he was married and he had children and didn’t he speak Irish to them. “O”, he said, ‘you may be sure I don’t’, he said, “and why should I”, he said, “I came over here without a word of English and I was an ass”, he said, “and everybody made fun at me” (my translation).

Connemara in what language they used to write home when they were abroad, and the answer regularly was “in English, of course”.

The marked difference between Breton and Irish is that nobody needed Breton, whereas having some Irish was a must for civil servants. This brought about a constant flow of visitors who came to “brush up” their Irish, which gave jobs to local people. When I was young, nobody would have addressed a stranger in Breton. If you met somebody you suspected could speak Breton, the elaborate strategy was to start a conversation in French and casually drop a sentence in Breton, which brought the magic sentence: *C’hwi oar brezoneg ive?* ‘So you too know Breton?’ and the conversation could then go on in that language without hurting any feeling. Addressing someone directly in Breton meant you thought he was a peasant. It was the opposite in the Irish Gaeltacht, where it was normal to greet in Irish people you did not know, as they probably were there to learn it.

In general, both Irish and Breton native speakers gave up passing on their language to their children because they simply wanted to be like the rest of the population, not because they were being harassed by enemies of their language.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THESE LANGUAGES?

We now can say without being termed “pessimistic” that both Irish and Breton are doomed as community languages. A recent survey tells us that in the Gaeltacht areas where Irish is the strongest only 22% of the young use it within their peer group, which means that “Irish is unlikely to remain the predominant community and family language [...] for more than another fifteen to twenty years” (Ó Giollagáin 2007, 31). As for Breton, according to a recent survey (Broudic 2009), 70% of the native-speakers are over 60. These persons often say they do not understand the type of Breton that is now used by young enthusiasts, who in turn have no idea what the language has stood for: many associate it with hardship and poverty, but also with a rural community life that has disappeared. The traditional language may have borrowed French words, but the culture it carried was original. Breton had no word like *Bonjour* or good morning, there was no Happy Christmas, only *Bloavez mad* ‘Happy new year’, no Happy birthday! The present-day learners, who are French speakers, need words to fit their native culture. They have made up *Demad* a calque of *Bonjour*, *Nedeleg laouen* for Happy Christmas (borrowed from the Welsh *Nadolig Llawen*) and *Deiz-ha-bloaz laouen* ‘happy birthday’: the only “birthday” noticed was the date of somebody’s funeral, a mass that was celebrated exactly one year and a day afterwards!

There are still a large number of native speakers left, and the persons who are interested in the language should retain as much as they can from their experience. Why learn Irish? as a friend of mine told me once, “because I like it”: that is, I think, a good reason.

New forms of these languages are being developed nowadays through schools and various media, which are institutions in the sense we have defined above... We can only wish them well, and perhaps advise them to try and understand the kind of values that were carried by the traditional speakers, not in order to mimic them — their civilisation has gone never to come back —, but at least to know who they were.

Articles are written daily on the subject of language loss and revival, forums on the Internet discuss the matter at length. Many do not understand how the language shift has come to pass, and they try to find a culprit: is it the State, the School, the bourgeois

classes, the English Empire or the French Republic? Do revivalists really believe they are going to make the Breton and Irish languages to be spoken again as community languages, even in the cities? Isn't the revivalists' outlook akin to some religious position? Is it possible to develop new rigorous and balanced discourses that can lead to the survival and development of languages now seemed destined to pass? These matters deserve a free and open debate.

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