

UNDERSTANDING THE DECLINE OF BRETON

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1. The present situation

1.1. How many Breton speakers are there?

The latest available estimate of the number of Breton speakers was provided by a survey carried out in 2024. The number of over-15s is now estimated at around 107,000. This represents a half of the figure reported in the previous assessment carried out in 2018 (Le Pipec 2025: 79).¹ The fall is staggering but is unfortunately part of a demographic process that has been predictable for some time. In 2018, the average age of speakers was 70, with 56% beyond this age limit, while only 5% were aged under 40. If we take into account the under-15s, the figures are as follows:

	Over 15	Under 15	Total	With limited understanding skills or “just a few words”
Western Brittany	83,000 (5.5%)	15,500	98,500	<i>718,000</i>
Eastern Brittany	24,000 (0.9%)	4,500	28,500	<i>882,000</i>
Total	107,000 (2.7%)	20,000	127,000	<i>1,600,000</i>

Fig. 1. Knowledge of Breton, in broad figures, as of 2024

The right-hand column of Figure 1 reveals the complexity of estimating the number of speakers of any language. Therefore, in addition to self-declared speakers, we must also take into account those who claim to understand Breton without being able to speak it, or those who pretend to know only ‘a few words’ of Breton.

1 According to the 2018 census conducted by the Region of Brittany (*Région Bretagne*), the number of speakers was estimated to be 214,000 (*Région Bretagne, Enquête sociolinguistique 2024 sur les langues de Bretagne, Synthèse*, 2025, 2, https://www.bretagne.bzh/app/uploads/S8460-REGION-BRETAGNE-Enquete-sociolinguistique-20.01_1.pdf, consulted November 2025).

This last category seems particularly problematic, since it is an extremely vague assessment, which can cover both very superficial knowledge or on the contrary, a good level of understanding, but which is underestimated on account of unconscious self-deprecation. One cannot help but be extremely surprised by the considerable figure of 1,600,000 people claiming a more or less well-founded knowledge of Breton (with a maximum in Eastern Brittany), bringing the highest possible estimate up to 1,727,000 people. Strikingly enough, these figures are quite comparable to those provided by the Republic of Ireland government concerning the knowledge and the use of Irish.² The only valid conclusion to this seems to be the necessity to underline the difficulty of such estimates with regard to a minority language, which can be under-reported when the language is stigmatised or over-reported when it is the subject of a strong identity or emotional investment.

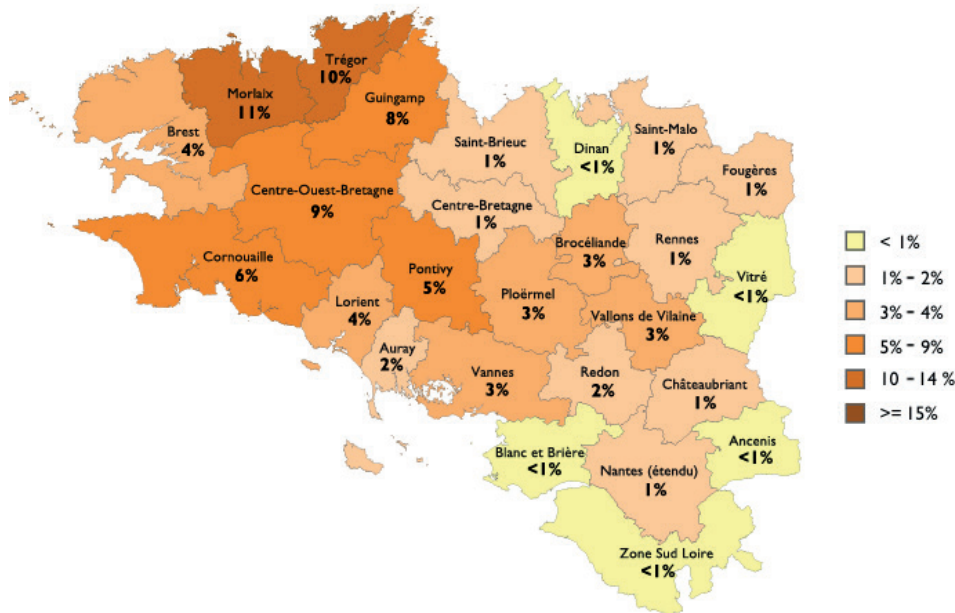


Fig. 2. Percentage of Breton speakers in the local population

² The Irish census of 2022 report a total number of 1,873,997 speakers, but only 71,928 speak the language on a daily basis (<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp8/censusofpopulation2022profile8-theirishlanguageandeducation/irishlanguageandthegaeltacht/>, consulted 1 March 2024).

In terms of geographical distribution, Breton speakers are still a little bit more concentrated in the western half of Brittany (Figure 2), but the age-old division between Eastern and Western Brittany is now beginning to fade on account of the fact that Breton speakers are no longer numerous enough to constitute a complete linguistic society, and Breton is becoming a language of networks, spoken throughout the whole territory.

1.2. Two intersecting dynamics

One of the major characteristics of the present situation is the paradoxical coexistence of two forms of bilingualism that correspond to opposing demographic and societal trajectories: one is residual and recessive, the other is quantitatively limited, but expanding.

1.2.1. Recessive bilingualism

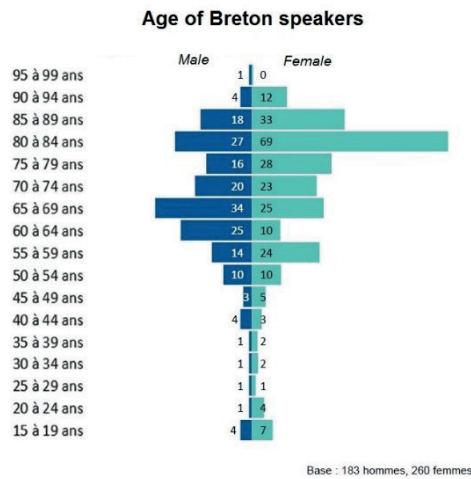


Fig. 3. Age pyramid of Breton speakers in 2018

Although three-quarters of the population of Western Brittany spoke Breton in 1914 (Broudic 1995: 89, 299–300), since that time there has been a drastic decrease in the number of speakers by about 90%. Because most Breton-speaking families ceased to transmit Breton to their children in the mid-20th century, the current

Breton-speaking population has aged considerably. This can be seen in Fig. 3, showing the situation in 2018. The sharp drop observed in 2024 can be explained principally by the passing of the oldest speakers.

For this reason, Breton may appear to some extent as the language of a vanished civilisation and its speakers as the survivors of a linguistic cataclysm. Until 1914, Western Brittany was a rural society, where a basic level of schooling seemed sufficient. Since then, Brittany has experienced an agricultural revolution that has resulted in a massive rural exodus to the major cities of France and an increase in the level of qualifications that have completely modified the economic and professional structure of Breton society. However, this entire process of modernisation took place through the medium of French, leaving Breton to survive only in the least dynamic geographical and socio-economic sectors. The consequence is that the Breton language never adopted the codes and language of modern French society and the outside world.

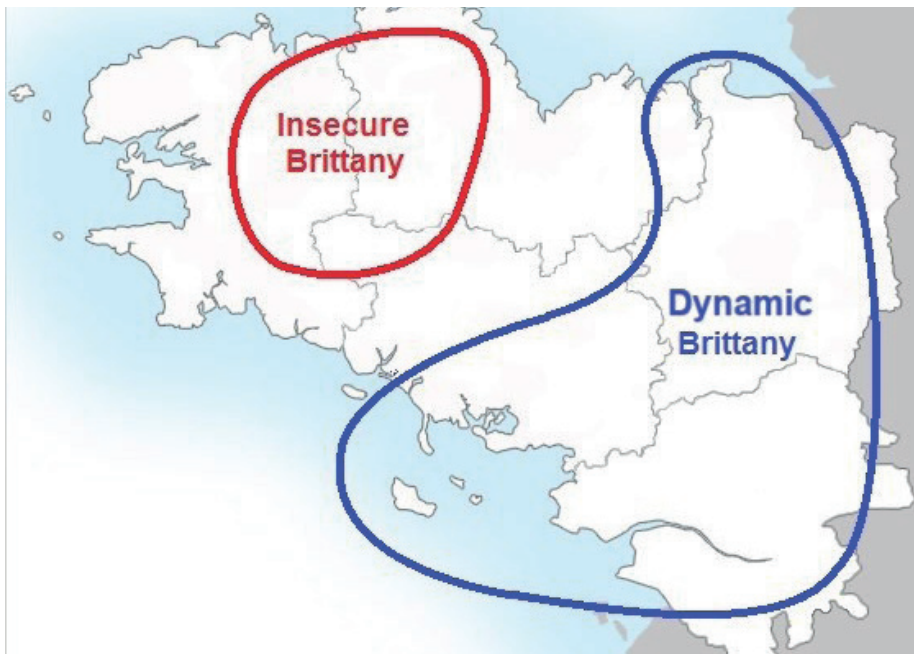


Fig. 4. Schematic view of the contemporary divide between Eastern and Western Brittany

The areas where Breton is most widely spoken corresponds to what might be called “insecure Brittany”, an area which is economically fragile and which offers low-skilled jobs with meagre prospects for advancement. This area of Brittany is struggling to retain its young people and, for this reason, is the most estranged from what might be described as “dynamic Brittany”, that is, the Rennes-Nantes-Vannes triangle where a younger population, highly skilled jobs and the highest incomes are concentrated (fig. 4). Except for the Vannes area, Breton has not been spoken here for the past 800 years. To a lesser extent, this also concerns the metropolitan area of Brest in Finistère. The coastal areas, especially along the south coast, are also tied to this dynamic region but these are increasingly specialised in real estate and attracting retirees. The contrast is thus between a socially and economically urbanised “dynamic Brittany” and a rural “insecure Brittany”.

1.2.2. Expanding bilingualism

However, Brittany is a region of France that is particularly proactive in defending its language and there are many signs of a certain vitality in Breton language use. On 17 December 2004, the *Regional Council of Brittany* unanimously voted in favour of a declaration recognising Breton and Gallo as established languages of Brittany alongside French. One of the most visible aspects of this linguistic policy is apparent in the bilingual road signs which are gradually becoming the norm.

If such initiatives have been undertaken, it is because there has been a growing societal demand over several decades. Its most obvious manifestation is undoubtedly bilingual education. According to the *Office public de la langue bretonne* (2025), the three school networks (Diwan, public and Catholic)³ educated a little over 20,000 students from the kindergarten to the high school levels. We must add some 11,000 others who are learning Breton as optional subjects or as a simple initiation into the language. Previously viewed as having no social utility, the knowledge of Breton has now become an asset on a CV. In 2023, the *Office public de la langue Breton* listed the equivalent of 1,850 jobs requiring a knowledge of Breton.

3 Diwan schools are privately run, full-immersion schools (pre-school to high-school levels). Private Catholic schools and public schools offer bilingual classes in both French and Breton.

Although it is still limited, the importance of Breton-language education has also allowed the emergence of an educated Breton-speaking youth, who have specific interests and needs. The disappearance of older generations now increases its weight: as of 2024, one speaker in three is under 40 years of age. It is this young population that ensures the success of Breton-language publications and constitutes the main audience of certain performers. But the existence of this Breton-speaking youth also has a knock-on effect: it helps to disassociate Breton from the stigma of backwardness and ignorance from which the language has suffered until recently. Breton is therefore very present on the internet and social networks. Of the 250 most used languages on Wikipedia, Breton hovers around the 50th place, a level that is out of all proportion with respect to the actual number of its speakers (Jacq 2010: 4).

1.2.3. A unique situation

The intersection between these two dynamics is a situation shared by many minority languages having such small numbers of speakers. Breton is engaged in a process of transition which, as alluded to above, has moved from a community language to a language of networks.⁴ Despite their numbers, this is the case even for older speakers who rarely use Breton among themselves nowadays, even though they are fully capable of doing so. In this group, Breton remains the language of only family members and friends (Broudic 2009, 2018). But this is even truer for Breton speakers under the age of fifty. Scattered among a mass of French-speakers, they can only form linguistic islands, which can be compared metaphorically to an archipelago that is a constantly being submerged by the tides: the neo-Breton linguistic community exists as soon as a few individuals are brought together and it disappears as soon as they separate.

Furthermore, the difference in the sociological profile and form that the language adopts in these two types of population groups allows us to identify two relatively distinct linguistic communities which are more or less socially intertwined. In Western Brittany, this is notably achieved through family ties. These two categories of speakers coexist but communicate relatively little. The former are, as we have seen, mainly elderly and poorly educated rural people who speak

⁴ The Breton situation is to be contrasted with minority languages which are in a position of force, such as Catalan or Basque in Spain.

dialectal forms of Breton that are characterised by endogenous phonological, prosodic and grammatical systems of Breton and a lexicon that is often very porous to the influences of French. The latter are younger, more urban and have a more extensive formal education. The varieties of Breton they speak vary according to their skills and their personal linguistic objectives and learning conditions. The forms of language oscillate between loyalty to dialectal Breton and standardised Breton, the latter being characterised by a more or less opaque lexicon, composed of neologisms that are often incomprehensible to dialect speakers, and a phonology that is completely aligned to that of French (Madeg 2010: 105–7). This binary opposition must, however, be considered with infinite caution.

Another consequence of this inter-generational linguistic division is that the territorial distribution of Breton has been transformed. The linguistic border that once cut the peninsula in two no longer makes sense for the new generations of Breton speakers. Even if the educational offer is increasingly dense in the west, it is gradually becoming more homogenous and today it is Rennes that has the most bilingual students, while Nantes takes sixth place, behind Brest, Quimper and Vannes, but ahead of Carhaix, Landerneau or Lorient (*Office public de la langue bretonne* 2025: 45).

2. How could this have happened?

2.1. Diglossia? Methodological considerations

The decline of Breton has, after all, led to rather little fieldwork within a strictly academic setting. As a result, understanding of the phenomenon is often dominated by an activist model, namely, the “peripheral” model adapted from Catalan research. According to this view, any contact between languages results in diglossia and hence linguistic conflict, the outcome of which can only result in either the normalisation or the disappearance of the dominated language (Matthey 2021, Darquennes 2015). However, this model is criticised by Swiss linguists who believe, for instance, that a consensual model is also possible. According to them, the disappearance of the less prestigious language is not inevitable (Matthey 2021; Boyer 2001: 50–2).

In Brittany, some linguists also reject the Catalan interpretation. Le Dû and Le Berre (1990), for example, maintain that French and Breton have formed a continuum

that has been in perfect symbiosis (parity/disparity), the variants of which were used according to the degree of formality (Calvez 2012). According to this view, the 20th century, with universal schooling and the mixing of populations due to wars and economic transformations, would thus have resulted in the progressive and perfectly accepted replacement of Breton by French. Linguistic change would therefore simply result from the sum of deliberate individual choices in favour of French which was perceived to be the language of progress.

To overcome this contradiction, it must be remembered that the notion of diglossia has been used so widely that it has taken on quite different meanings depending on the authors (Prudent 1981). The definition of diglossia as a conflict is thus rooted in J. Fishman's theories (Fishman 1967), who extended it to contacts between distinct languages. This is very different from Ferguson's original definition (Ferguson 1959). For him, diglossia is a phenomenon of complementarity, which associates high (H) and low (L) variants of *the same language*. If we stick to this conceptualisation, diglossia and linguistic conflict are clearly two different things (Hudson 2002). In this case, the relationships between varieties of Breton cannot be of the same nature as the relationships between Breton (taken as a whole) and French: diglossia in one case, societal bilingualism (i.e. linguistic conflict) in the other:

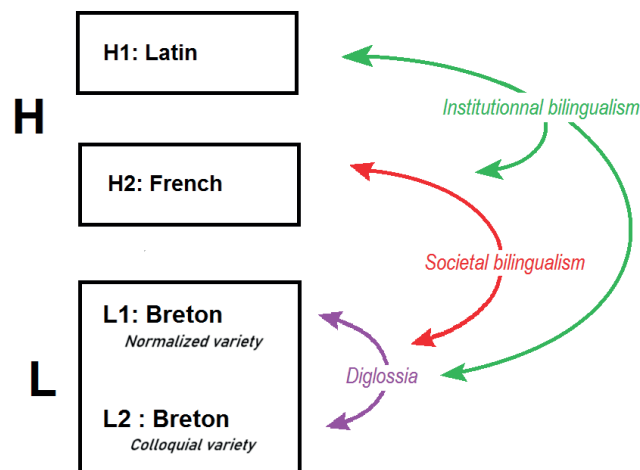


Fig. 5. Diglossia in the historical context of Latin-French-Breton contact

All this, however, is only a simplification of reality because, throughout its history, Breton has also been in contact with Latin. Now it is obvious that, in this case, Latin has never threatened the existence of either French or Breton. It is because this bilingualism was of another type, that is to say, a language used only in the institutions that frame society (the Church and civil society). In this case, we are dealing with ‘institutional bilingualism’, a form of bilingualism that is in some ways abstract, additional and superimposed (Fig. 5).

But when we try to observe ancient practices, which is possible through the corpus of public documents produced in Western Brittany from the Middle Ages to the end of the *Ancien Régime* (i.e. until the end of the reign of Louis XVI, 1789-1793) (Abgrall 1915, Abgrall 1916), it seems that French occupied a similar function to Latin for centuries: purely institutional, without affecting the social practices of Breton or threatening its existence (Le Pipec 2018).

2.2. From functional trilingualism to monolingualism

The history of French-Breton contacts would therefore be that of a shift from this institutional bilingualism to societal bilingualism, an evolution through which French passes from a symbolic status to that of a legitimate language destined to replace Breton. This was an extremely slow process, and its very slowness explains why it has been largely painless. That is to say, because French has been spoken around them (if not used by them) for centuries, Breton speakers have never really considered that French was imposed upon them.

The decline of Breton does not therefore seem to have been solely a voluntary and coercive policy of imposing French which would have arisen from the French Revolution. As early as 1719, seventy years before the storming of the Bastille, Vallange, the author of a method of teaching French, explained that thanks to his work, ‘we will be able to eradicate all the patois and jargons of the Kingdom’ (Vallange 1719: 178). For him, this was a highly desirable project, because ‘when there is only one language, there is reason to hope that minds and hearts of the people will be more closely united’ (ibid.). The revolutionaries did indeed speak out virulently about the need to generalise French and destroy the linguistic diversity of the country, but they

were only radicalising a much earlier discourse: French is the language of civilisation, any other language is incapable of playing a comparable cultural and political role.

To understand how this conception was forged, I propose to identify three phases of the Modern period. With respect to the history of the Breton language, the first covers the period from 1499 until 1563, the second deals with the period of the Counter-Reformation (1563–1725), while the third phase concerns the 18th century Enlightenment.

2.2.1. The Bretons miss out on the first phase toward alphabetisation (1499–1563)

From the point of view of linguistic history, the first stage of the Modern period begins with the end of the monopoly of Latin which led to the promotion of vernacular languages throughout Europe. With the printing of the *Catholicon*, the first Breton-French-Latin dictionary, the year 1499 provides a good starting point for Breton. At this time, Breton elites were not behind their time and had access to the latest technologies. But for the rise of a vernacular language to be possible, it had to attain sufficient prestige to be considered worthy of replacing Latin. French, an old court, administrative and literary language, was well equipped to negotiate such a shift. Breton, however, was in a far less favourable position on account of the fact that the mass of Breton speakers remained illiterate, a situation which persisted until the end of the 19th century when primary schooling became compulsory through the medium of French. Interestingly, this also concerns Romance- or Gallo-speaking Brittany. In both cases, this can be explained by the absence of two key factors that would have been necessary for this change: Brittany as a whole was less exposed to urbanisation and to the emergence of Protestantism (Lebrun et al 1981: 310; Buret & Ozouf 1977: 183–4, 230).

Before Brest became an urban centre and a French naval base, Western Brittany lacked any major cities. The urban network was composed of a constellation of small towns whose influence was local (Meyer 1987: 258–9; Minois 1992: 362). These small towns formed a web in which the demographic, economic and cultural potential was diverse. To a large extent, this can be explained by Brittany's geographical isolation in relation to the Rhine axis which was at the heart of European intellectual dynamism. The consequence was the absence of an intelligentsia. In short, unlike

Montpellier, Strasbourg, Bologna, etc., Brittany never hosted a major intellectual centre. Later on, Protestantism thrived among populations that had already attained a critical mass of literacy that had been rendered possible by these strong urban environments (Chaunu 1975: 487–92). Simply put, Brittany did not have the necessary foundations for the Protestant Reformation to take root. However, the link between Protestantism and literacy was a win-win relationship. Once Protestantism was established, the new educational demands expressed by the Reformers (Lebrun, Venard & Quénard 1981: 179, 251–5, 421; Furet & Ozouf 1977: 183–84) contributed to supporting and expanding the spread of reading and writing which accelerated the initial momentum (Chaunu 1975: 474). But the educational advantages acquired were maintained even in the regions of France from which the Reformation was forced to retreat. Indeed, the Catholic Church put all its energy into fighting the Protestant heresy and, therefore, into teaching Catholic doctrine to the humble (Furet & Ozouf 1977: 72, 230; Lebrun, Venard & Quénard 1981: 422; Chartier, Compère & Dominique 1976: 105). Conversely, in regions like Brittany, where Protestantism never took hold, indifference to writing was the rule.⁵

The *Catholicon* is therefore something of an illusion in the sense that printing did not come from a local social demand, nor even from a professional one. Proof of this is that until the 17th century, most Breton-language books were printed in Paris (Queniart 1985). It was consequently French and French alone that would be the big winner as a result of the decline of Latin. The promotion of French meant that this language would no longer be an abstract reality, confined to administration and public inscriptions (signs, etc.), but an increasingly common practice. It even became the exclusive language of the most privileged elites and, for many of these, it became their mother tongue. By not having been exposed to this first phase of alphabetisation, Western Breton society missed out on an opportunity to raise the status of its language to the rank of a widely disseminated written secular language, even on the scale of this small territory. Quite the contrary, Breton remained a language with pronounced medieval characteristics, that is to say, its use was wholly confined to its spoken varieties within wholly domestic contexts while the prestige language was French (and no longer Latin) in formal administrative contexts.

5 Cf. Y. Celton's contribution to this volume for a Catholic perspective.

2.2.2. The double-edged heritage of the Counter-Reformation (1563–1725)

That being said, Breton speakers benefitted from the second phase, that of the Catholic Reformation. Very active in Brittany, the Church provided the Breton language with renewed vigour and effective tools to advance literacy. For instance, the archaic spellings of Middle Breton were abandoned and replaced by simpler graphic solutions. An entire literature of religious piety was born (Calvez 2013–4). This was followed by Breton language dictionaries and grammars the use of which was mainly confined to clerics. At the same time, with the birth of the modern state and the increasing complexity of administration, the most modest elements of the population (Oges 1936, 1937) were now exposed to writing through leases, contracts, receipts, notarial deeds, civil status, deliberations of parish councils (Grosperin 1984: 84–5), etc. However, all these official writings were written in French. In the popular mind, the use of Breton was limited to internal and oral use while French was essentially the language of administration and power.

First and foremost, the goal of the Church was not to promote Breton but its only agenda is to save souls, and for this reason, the Church's decision to make use of the Breton language was purely pragmatic and exclusively limited to religion (Chartier, Compère & Dominique 1976: 104). The objective was certainly not to expand literacy among the people. This required that the church would make use of the living, local, oral culture. This is why the main vectors of religious instruction were through hymns and the famous *taolennou*, the mission boards (i.e. symbolic maps and paintings, cf. Celton's article in this volume) that served as a visual aids and which the priests explained in detail to their congregations (Croix 1993: 279–287; Croix 1995: 508–510).

In fact, by initiating the orthographic reform, the Church opened a Pandora's box. On account of the diversity of the dialects, the abandonment of the visual uniformity of Middle Breton, in favour of a more phonetic spelling, excluded those dialect speakers whose pronunciation differed too significantly from that of the new standard. This explains the gradual division of Breton domain into two broad dialect regions. As a result of the distinct nature of its Breton, the diocese of Vannes developed its own literary standard during the 18th century (Rolland 1995).

Given that the dominant language of the written culture was French, both universal and invariant, Breton appeared all the more as a language that did not have a shared standard. It was thus associated with its unwritten local varieties. If, for some reason, it was necessary to write in Breton, it could only be done by adopting a spontaneous phonetic orthography that corresponded to the local dialectal pronunciation.

2.2.3. Breton, a vestige... (1725–1794)

The first quarter of the 18th century marked the beginning of the third phase of the modern era, namely, the Enlightenment. During this time, the focus on educational issues shifted. From this point on, Protestantism was marginalised throughout France and education ceased to be a means of reinforcing the authority of the Catholic Church and royal power. Rather, education became an objective in its own right. Although Breton speakers benefitted indirectly from the ongoing movement towards literacy (Fleury & Valmary 1957; Quénart 1985: 289), they nevertheless suffered from the fact that their language had not been accorded the status of a literate culture.

After more than a century of the intensive teaching of Catholic doctrine, the religious education of the people resulted in some advances in Breton-language writing. The 18th century is best known for the production of Breton dictionaries and pious literature and the works that were printed during this time experienced real popular diffusion. The *Buez ar saent* ('Lives of the Saints') by Marigo (1752) is emblematic in this regard. If Léon (northwestern Brittany) was more impacted by this literature, other less literate regions were also positively affected. For instance, in 1774 in Spézet (central Cornouaille), this book of piety was awarded as a prize to the most deserving children on the day of their communion (Oges 1936: 133). But the rise in the level of literacy served mainly to reinforce the diffusion of French-language literature. As early as 1626, Quiquer's *colloquia*, a bilingual phrase-book for travellers, presenting daily dialogues in both languages, made the learning of French a primary goal for schoolchildren (Quiquer 1626: 32–5). More than a century and a half later, Le Jeune, author of a bilingual grammar manual in 1800, reiterated the same objective (Le Jeune 1800: 125).

The evolution of ideas during the 18th century led to a new phase in the delegitimisation of Breton. From the 1760s onwards, the bourgeoisie gradually freed itself from the tutelage of the Church. In opposition to the Jesuits, they took hold of the educational question and redefined it according to their own standards. From now on, the fundamentally pastoral, theological and humanistic orientation of ecclesiastical education no longer corresponded to the ambitions of these elites (Lebrun, Venard and Quénard 1981: 529–42). In 1763, de La Chalotais, attorney general of the Parliament of Brittany, published his *Essai d'éducation nationale* ('Essay on National Education') where, without neglecting Latin, he advised that "precedence should be given to the mother tongue" ('*donner le pas à la Langue maternelle*') (de La Chalotais 1763: 102), the mother tongue being French. He continued stating that, in order to learn grammar, "the first task will be to have children practice constructing sentences by listening to a book (read aloud) in French" ('*la première opération seroit de faire faire aux enfants sur un Livre François qu'ils entendent, la construction des phrases*') (*ibid.*, 107). The fact that a significant proportion of children throughout France did not understand French was not a problem for him, since these lessons were intended to benefit the education of the national elites. Not a word was said about the language(s) of the people not even to express the wish to have French replace the regional languages. Breton was simply absent from his intellectual horizon. But if this is the case for de La Chalotais, who had family ties in Western Brittany, should it come as a surprise that other authors who were from Paris or French-speaking provinces proposed similar projects?

Since 1694, the dictionary of the *Académie française* has defined the nation as "the inhabitants of the same State, of the same country, who live under the same laws and use the same language, etc." ('*les habitants d'un même Etat, d'un même pays, qui vivent sous mêmes loix et usent de même langage etc.*') (1694: 110). It therefore stands to sense that, in France, French was viewed as the national language. The simple existence of other languages never even seemed to be considered until the end of the 18th century. It is de Talleyrand (1791) who appears to have been the first of the revolutionaries to address the linguistic question. To create the impression that linguistic diversity in the kingdom was an oddity (de Talleyrand 1791: 94–5), languages other than French were portrayed as a "mass of corrupt dialects, the last relics of

feudalism” (*‘une foule de dialectes corrompus, derniers restes de la féodalité’*) (ibid.). They were therefore disqualified from the outset and deemed unfit to transmit a high culture. Only the French language could fulfil this role. But for Talleyrand these were not just vestiges: the linguistic diversity of the kingdom was “detrimental to the people” (*‘tourné contre le peuple’*) (ibid.). For this reason, he presented minority languages and dialects as “tools of manipulation” that were intended to produce and maintain “a strange inequality” (*‘une étrange inégalité’*) (ibid.). How then could they be accepted as languages of education? Even though the law of 27 Brumaire Year III (17 November 1794) authorised the use of minority languages and patois in teaching as auxiliary languages, their fate was sealed and the practice of minority languages would have to cease altogether because “the force of circumstances demands it” (*‘la force des choses le commande’*) (ibid.).

Conclusion

These three key periods of the modern era have one thing in common, that is, they signal a rise of French which, at each successive stage, strengthened its position as one of the most illustrious languages of culture on the European stage: from the generation of the *Pléiade* to the Enlightenment, during the reign of Louis XV (18th c.), French was not considered to be the only language that counted, but rather one of those that counted (along with Spanish, Italian, English and even German in Russia). Correlatively, Breton had long been in an asymmetrical position, and counted less and less. Far from the epicentre of the European literary movement, Breton speakers had missed the crucial primary stage of developing a literate society. From that time onward, because the Breton elites mastered French, a language which fulfilled the specific requirements that a literate civilisation demands, why would they bother to refine Breton and transform it into an equally suitable linguistic alternative?

If Breton did not disappear during the 18th century, it is because the Catholic Church made it the medium for preaching during the Counter-Reformation. In doing so, it confined Breton to the role of a language of faith. When the idea of universal education began to emerge, Breton was disqualified from the start. As a language of oral culture, the contribution of Breton to human civilisation was no longer understood by urban elites whose view of culture was bound to literacy. As for its written

register, Breton was so restricted in terms of intellectual opportunities in comparison to French and because it was not viewed as a credible linguistic alternative.

All the elements of this linguistic ideology were therefore in place well before the French Revolution. During the 19th century, when voices opposed this ideology, they remained largely inaudible given that the spread of French constituted one of the components of the ideology of progress. If many members of the clergy were more favourable to Breton, it was because they saw it as a means of preserving the values that they attributed to rural society. It was also a political strategy at a time when anticlericalism was taking hold at the head of the State and when the defence of Breton appeared to be a lever for mobilisation against the Republic. It was thus not until 1894 that Breton began to be taught in seminaries. Indeed, the Church was not viscerally attached to Breton either and many priests in the field also shared the belief that mastering French was the best way to progress socially.

For those who were sincerely attached to Breton, what was the point of defending the use of the language when everyone else considered French to be their ideal? What was the point of promoting Breton if it could not serve as a vector for education or if it remained solely an oral language? What was the point of literacy in Breton if it merely constituted a phase of transition on the road to acquiring French, the “true language of culture”? It was during the second half of the 20th century that Western Brittany finally became, through the channel of French, a literate civilisation. Its old culture, based on orality and on complementarity between Latin, French and Breton, then disintegrated, leading to the abandonment of Breton, without there being much need for official coercive measures (even if these did indeed exist). The contrast is stunning here between the mobilisation of many Bretons to protest the expulsions of the clergy as a result of the *Loi de 1905*, and, except for a few voices preaching in the desert, the general acceptance of the banning of Breton in schools.⁶

Today’s Breton speakers reflect this history. It is now a language which is a mere cultural inheritance, a language of networks and no longer a community

6 After separating the church from the state in 1905, the Church owned buildings now belonged to the State. This measure was interpreted by many believers as yet another attack on the Church.

language. The current situation can leave one feeling pessimistic about the future of Breton, but the story is not over yet and the decline is only temporary. Because Breton is so closely bound to Breton identity, the Breton language makes it desirable and serves as a sort of life insurance. The whole challenge for present and future generations is to ensure that, in linguistic terms, Breton does not degenerate into some sort of Franco-Celtic jargon having no connection with its age-old Brythonic ancestor. Viewed from an extra-linguistic perception, Breton is recognised by everyone as being a positive common inheritance, a heritage that is shared by all of those who wish to make Brittany their home, regardless of their origins.

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