

TRANSLATION AS *DE FACTO* LANGUAGE PLANNING WITHIN THE
FRAMEWORK OF SUBORDINATED
LANGUAGES:
STATUS PLANNING PRAXIS IN BRITTANY

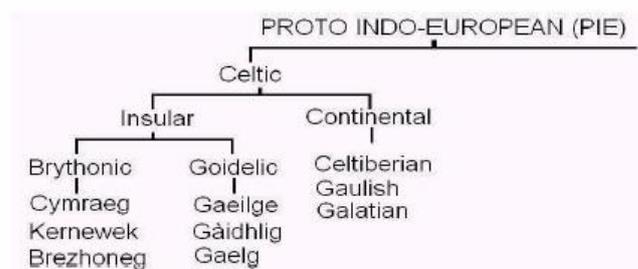
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INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Breton language

Albeit the only Celtic language spoken in Continental Europe, Breton (*Brezhoneg*) is not an indigenous Continental Celtic language but rather a member of the Insular Celtic group (Fig. 1) brought to Brittany from the British Isles in the V-VI Centuries. It is part of the Brythonic (p-Celtic) subgroup and as such is most closely related to both Cornish (*Kernewek*) and Welsh (*Cymraeg*) respectively, and more distantly with the remaining Goidelic (q-Celtic) languages spoken in Ireland (*Gaeilge*), Scotland (*Gàidhlig*) and the Isle of Mann (*Gaelg*).

Fig. 1: The Celtic Language Family



Modern Breton covers a range of diatopical varieties (*rannyezhoù* 'dialects'), traditionally grouped into four main blocs based on the traditional territorial division called *broioù* ('bishoprics', Map 1), viz. *kernevek*, *leoneg* (the basis for the modern literary standard), *tregereg* and *gwenedeg*. It is worth noting that this geographic divide does not coincide

with the French division of the territory into *départements* (Map 2: officially the *Liger Atlantel* is not part of the so-called *Région Bretagne*).

Map 1: Traditional boundaries(bishoprics)

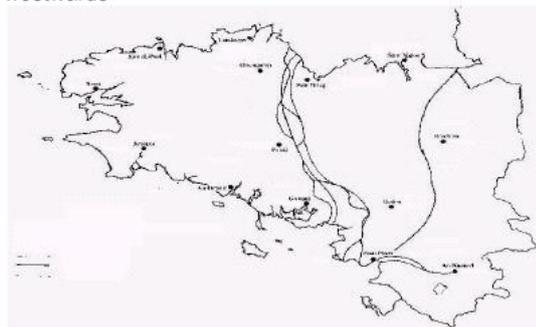


Map 2: French Administrative Division



The linguistic limits have continued to recede steadily westwards towards the outlying extremes of what is called *Breizh Izel* ('Lower Brittany'), creating a linguistic divide between this westernmost Breton-speaking area and the most populous, predominantly French-speaking *Breizh Uhel* ('Upper Brittany') to the east. Map 3 (adapted from Abalain, 1999: 92) shows how the Breton-speaking area has rapidly receded in successive waves since the XVI Century until 1941.

Map 3: Breton is forced westwards



This geographical retreat was accompanied by a continual decline in the number of speakers¹ (Table 1). Owing to the absence of any official figures, recent estimates vary considerably concerning the current number of Bretonspeakers, ranging from the rather optimistic “less than a million” (Katzner, 1995) and “1,200,000 of whom 500,000 use it on a daily basis” (Grimes, 2000) to the more likely figure of 550,000-500,000 (Broudig, 1987; Campbell, 1998; Denez, 1998), the vast majority of whom are older speakers living in mainly rural Lower-Brittany, with smaller pockets to be found around the rest of the country.

Table 1: Chronological decline in the number of speakers (Broudig: 1995)

DATE	BRETON-SPEAKERS		FRENCH-SPEAKERS	
	MONOLINGUAL	TOTAL	MONOLINGUAL	TOTAL
1831	80%	-	-	17%
1863	86%	98%	2%	-
1902	50%	75%	-	25%
1952	6%	73%	27%	94%
1979	-	46,00%	54,00%	100%
1990	-	17%	83%	100%

Nevertheless, following on from a relatively recent period of linguistic and cultural activism which can be traced back to the upsurge of interest in ethno-cultural identity of the Seventies, movements such as the *Diwan* Bretonlanguage schools and more politically proactive groups such as SAB (*Stourm ar Brezhoneg* 'Fight for Breton') which painted out French-only road signs helped bring the language question to the fore in Brittany. The increasing pressure brought to bear by the *Emsav* ('Movement') as a whole has helped raise both public awareness and political willingness to concede some ground to the language, thereby in turn creating greater public exposure to the language and thus fostering an increasingly favourable attitude towards the language². Unfortunately,

¹ For the reasons behind this situation see Abalain (2000), Denez (1998) and Stephens (1993).

² Quoting the results of a survey carried out in 2001 by Alistair Cole (University of Caerdydd), Richard (2001) reports: "[...] la très grande majorité des Bretons (85 %) considèrent la langue bretonne comme un pilier de l'identité régionale [...]"[The vast majority of Bretons (85%) consider their language to be one of the pillars of [their] regional identity.]

however, although such actions on the part of local and regional bodies are becoming increasingly common throughout Brittany, including parts of mainly French-speaking Upper Brittany, such as the bilingual French-Breton and French-Gallo panels in two metro terminals in the main city of Roazhon, ongoing efforts still lack concerted coordination at a national level, with some departments such as Penn-ar-Bed clearly leading the way, while others such as Morbihan continue to lag some way behind.

The purpose of this brief study is to explore the recent upsurge of interest on the part of local and regional authorities towards granting official approval to the Breton language by placing it in the public arena and to analyse the actual state of language planning as it stands today – specifically in the field of status planning – in order to determine to what extent translations destined for public consumption act as a *de facto* language policy by modifying the prevailing linguistic landscape and assessing the potential sociolinguistic and socio-political implications and effects of such covert policy as it stands.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LANGUAGE POLICY TYPES

For the purposes of this study it is useful to establish a distinction between what could be termed '*de iure*' and '*de facto*' language policies:

Here the term *de iure* is used to refer to all or any language policies which exist within an established legal framework, such as Galician or Irish Gaelic. Such legal frameworks, in the widest sense of the term (specific and general plans, laws, ordinances, etc.) set out the desired objectives of the language planning exercise within the context of an albeit covert predetermined political agenda ('harmonic bilingualism', etc.). As such, *de iure* policies are open to public and political scrutiny and debate in the initial phase and to monitoring the levels of fulfilment of the espoused aims once the policy has been implemented. Although translation clearly plays an important role in the wider field of planning for subordinated languages (Diaz Fouces, 1998; Diaz Fouces 2003), specific translation policies are not usually contemplated as an integral part of such language

policies, thus relegating translation to the position of a mere tool, thus failing to recognise its potential as an agent for status and corpus planning.

The lack of such a *de iure* policy framework in the case of specific subordinated languages does not necessarily imply the absence of any efforts geared to improving the status of the language in question. More often than not such endeavours are of an *ad hoc* 'voluntarist' (Antia 2000: 8 & 10) nature, although they may also go on to win the support of certain public bodies. An ensemble of such efforts can be described in terms of a *de facto* language policy which inevitably works to set political agenda(s), be they explicitly stated as such or not. The prime aim of this paper is to elucidate the underlying agendas and to assess the impact and effectivenesses of such *de facto* policies on improving sociolinguistic perceptions. Unlike *de iure* policies, translation destined for public consumption (Baxter, s.d.) is the basic key-pin for any *de facto* policy rather than merely an instrument used to implement other policy items.

Owing both to their different internal characteristics and their level exposure to the general public, it is also important to establish a distinction between two main types of translation, namely that destined for public versus that destined for public consumption. The latter covers all and any items translated to be used mainly to identify places of interest on public signs and usually involving short texts based primarily on short nominal or adjectival phrases. Furthermore, unlike most kinds of translations destined for private consumption (books, articles, etc.), the kinds of translations destined for public consumption dealt with here are most often – if not exclusively – used in conjunction with the original text in a bilingual format. As such, translated elements of this type play an important part in shaping the linguistic landscape which has been shown to have a potentially valuable impact by influencing public perceptions concerning the languages represented (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Indeed, given that all Breton speakers are functionally bilingual, what this means in practice is that the presence of such bilingual signs in public places are designed primarily to serve a symbolic rather than a purely informational function (Landry & Bourhis 1997) “acting on the linguistic representations” (Calvet, 2000), all the more so when used in almost exclusively French-

speaking areas where the actual number of people even capable of understanding the signs in Breton is close to nil.

One final important feature to be dealt with here involves the inherently *ad hoc* nature of *de facto* planning endeavours, be they purely on a voluntary basis or with the full backing of the appropriate authorities. In other words, the lack of a global, coherent framework almost inevitably leads to the application of piecemeal solutions depending upon the activeness of local pressure groups and the willingness of local authorities, leading to a heterogeneous linguistic landscape with large disparities at the national level and even from one town to the next.. This patchiness will be considered here as an important element for evaluating the potential sociolinguistic impact of the overall linguistic panorama and the symbolic messages it sends out to the population at large³.

CASE STUDY: BRETON TODAY

Despite the notable upsurge of interest in Breton culture as a whole which began in earnest in the Seventies and successive waves of interest, each building upon the last, that have followed and which have managed to put the language more squarely in the public arena, until very recently most efforts were voluntary in nature and notwithstanding growing willingness on the part of local and regional authorities to back such initiatives and to provide ever more public signage in Breton, a fully-fledged, nationwide language policy yet remains to be forthcoming.

Indeed, although the situation has improved considerably over recent years with bilingual signage emerging and flourishing all over Brittany, including areas where Breton is either not spoken or is not spoken by a substantial amount of the population, efforts still remain uncoordinated and resulting policy implemented inconsistent and irregular at the national

³ “[...] the symbolic function of the linguistic landscape is most striking in settings where language has emerged as the most important dimension in the ethnic identity.[it] can contribute most directly to the positive social identity of ethnolinguistic groups.” Landry & Bourhis (1997: 27)”

level. Progress can most clearly be seen in certain *départements* and certain areas of others and in the public sector rather than the private sector.

Micro studies vs. macro studies

Whereas micro studies deal with particular aspects of any given phenomenon, such as, for example, the specific strategies employed for translating public signs into Breton (Baxter, s.d.), macro studies such as this attempt to provide a more general picture by dealing with the larger elements of the same phenomenon seen from a broader perspective. Comparing the results of studies carried out on both levels of analysis for the same field provides useful material for corroborating general hypotheses.

The macro study concerned here involves an overall analysis to gauge the linguistic landscape created over the last few years in the town of Lannuon in order to determine the underlying pattern of the *de facto* language policy at work there. Based on personal experience rather than empirical evidence, this data seems to be compatible with the overall situation in the rest of the area, further extrapolable to the general situation in Brittany as a whole. This particular choice of town for the field study was based on several factors: it represents an urban centre (population approx. 18,000) in the heart of a traditionally Breton-speaking area and thus offers a wide and rich array of signage and despite belonging to Aodoù-an-Arvor and thus falling outside Penn-ar-Bed, the *department* which has historically led the way as far as promoting Breton at the official level is concerned, there has nevertheless been a concerted effort towards creating a public space for a more or less generalised bilingual signage policy.

At first sight, the initial impression is a positive one, especially for anyone familiar with the almost complete lack of official signage in Breton in the not so distant past⁴. Indeed, one is pleasantly surprised to find whole sets of official, fully bilingual road signs

⁴ A recent publication by the Breton Language Office (TermBret 2002: 4) expresses this as: "Panellerezh, eus an hunvre d'ar gwirvoud" [signage, from dream to reality]

including not only the correct Breton form of place names but also the translation of other items without necessarily resorting to direct borrowings from French (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Fully bilingual set of road signs



However, such examples should not be seen in isolation but rather in relation to their immediate surrounding environment made up of other such signs, grouped into what could be referred to as 'clusters'. When reset in this broader context, the initial positive impression caused by the isolated examples above is considerably reduced, with full Bretonisation being the exception rather than the rule within a generally haphazard overall practice. In fact, on some signs some elements are translated into Breton whereas actual Breton place names are cited only in their French version⁵ (Figs. 3 & 4), e.g. Perros-Guireg (Br. Perroz-Gireg) and Plestin-les-Grèves (Br. Plistin).

Figs. 3 & 4: Two other items within a clusters showing partial Bretonisation



The underlying message symbolised by this situation is quite simply that while French is omnipresent and quintessential, Breton can be excluded just as easily as it can be included, projecting the social perception of Breton as a mere optional appendage to

⁵ This is often – though by no means always – the result of superimposing new signs in a bilingual format on top of older, French-only signs rather than renovating the latter.

French, all the more so when Gallicised renderings of original Breton place names are paradoxically portrayed as the originals with the original Breton forms – physically and symbolically -- subordinated to them (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Sign showing original Breton name portrayed as a translation of the French placed above it



Bearing in mind the fact that such practices affect the linguistic landscape as a whole on a symbolic rather than a purely informative level, it must be taken into account that the receptors of the underlying messages include not only the Breton-speaking community itself, but also the larger French-speaking community, thus potentially undermining its effectiveness as a means of language promotion by subliminally discouraging people from using or learning in either case what is ostensibly portrayed as a 'superfluous' language.

Other important, more specifically graphic factors symbolically representing the subordinate relationship of Breton with regards to French involve the differential use of certain formal devices, namely size, type and place⁶. In other words, Breton almost invariably appears beneath or to the right of the French text⁷, often in a marked type -- usually italics⁸ -- and as often as not in smaller lettering. (Fig. 6 & 7a). Furthermore, as Fig. 7b indicates, reduced size is cannot necessarily be explained by the need to compress

⁶ “Kuit a zroukziforc'h etre ar yezhoù hag a-du gant an diskoulmoù e pleustr e brouioù divyezhek pe liesyezhek demokratel [...] ec'h erbed Ofis ar Brezhoneg ober gant an doare eeunañ, ar pezh a dalvez skrivañ an div yezh en hevelep mod rik-ha-rik. Da lavaret eo, memes font, memes stil, memes liv, memes arouezennoù.” TermBret (2002: 7) [In order to avoid negatively differences between the languages and in line with the solutions applied in democratic bilingual and multilingual countries [...] the Breton language Office recommend the use of a unified system, writing both languages in exactly the same way], i.e. the same font, the same style, the same colour and the same symbols.]

⁷ *Cfr.* Earlier recommendations: “ Evit ma vo talvoudekaet ar brezhoneg ez erbedomp e skrivañ pe a-gleiz d'ar galleg pe a-us dezhañ.” Skol-Uhel ar Vro (1992) [In order to highlight the Breton language, we recommend that it be written either to the left or above the French].

⁸ For recommendations concerning lettering in general and on the use of italics in particular, see TermBret (2002: 78)

a longer Breton text. Thankfully, at least, fantasy pseudo-Celtic lettering has now been completely abandoned on official signs although colour is still occasionally used to denote the special, 'semi-serious' status of Breton⁹.

Figs. 6 & 7a-b: Bilingual signs showing the use of relative size and differential lettering



The deployment of such graphic devices further serves to reinforce the effects described above deriving from an inconsistent and incoherent bilingual policy, tending to indicate on a symbolic level is that Breton is a 'special' (as opposed to 'ordinary') or 'abnormal' (as opposed to 'normal') optional luxury tacked on beneath or behind the omnipresent and indispensable French.

CONCLUSIONS

Grass roots language campaigning and activism have helped raise public awareness of the language, making it more prominent and promoting a favourable attitude towards it, thus effectively paving the way for the current situation to emerge as far as officially-backed, bilingual signage is concerned.

Even the most casual observer could all but fail to acknowledge the huge progress that has been made over recent years in securing a significant place for the Breton language in the public arena. However, despite, a long way still remains before the situation is

⁹ Although not found in the corpus analysed here, in similar studies (Baxter s.d.) examples are quoted of signs where colours such as pale mauve are used for Breton as opposed to the more serious, standard black used for French. This feature is also reported in *corpora* from other countries with asymmetrical bilingual signage policies and practices (*Vid.* Hicks 2002).

stabilised and homogeneous throughout the country, with Breton set firmly on an equal footing with French in the domain discussed here.

Current practices tend to portray the Breton text as merely testimonial and always secondary to French. This is done, inadvertently or not, two main ways: firstly, by creating heterogeneous situations where French is always present but where fully bilingual signs coexist with others where Breton is partially or wholly absent and secondly, by the use of certain graphic elements which clearly mark the Breton text as subordinate to the French.

Taken together, these factors operating at the symbolic or representational level serve to emphasise the subordinate role of Breton as a 'superfluous' language, thus effectively potentially diminishing the effectiveness of such bilingual signage campaigns as tools/agents for status planning (normalisation) as perceived not only by local Breton-speaking populations but also by potential French-speaking learners.

All in all, coherent signage in Breton still remains far from being the norm, and the time has come for overall, fully coordinated legal framework and a *de facto* plan with clear aims and methodology in order to channel the work already done to ensure an even policy for the whole of Brittany whilst at the same time endeavouring to curtail negative symbolic/representational side-defects regarding the symbolic portrayal of the relative official status of Breton *vis à vis* French¹⁰.

Breton still has a long way to go before it becomes an element of the linguistic landscape in Brittany on a par with French, and one can only hope that the current pendular motion will continue to forge forwards, with local activism encouraging on-going official backing, in turn boosting public awareness and support for Breton and ultimately its rightful place in Brittany at all levels.

¹⁰ This begs the question, of course, of whether this would ever be feasible within the context of the current highly centralised French State.

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