The Ideology of Monolingualism as 'Standard' in Brittany

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A noticeable feature of some language revitalisation movements is the insistence, on the part of some speakers, for the minority language to be used in all the domains the majority language occupies. This has given rise to demands for governmental information to be dissipated in a variety of minority and regional languages across Europe. Other institutions (such as banks, energy suppliers, etc.) have opted to produce bilingual forms and other paperwork which includes much or all of the information supplied (or solicited) in the minority language. Some countries, most notably Wales and Ireland, with their respective language acts (1993 and 2003), have required public bodies to state explicitly how they will ensure a place for the Welsh and Irish languages in their institutions.

In this paper, I intend to examine how such a situation has come about, concentrating on the linguistic situation in Brittany as a case study. I pay particular attention to the emerging ideologies I discovered whilst engaged in fieldwork there over the past few years. These ideologies are not confined to the Breton case of course, but they do explain why, after many years of intransigence, the French state is beginning to allow signage to be erected in regional languages such as Breton, Basque and Corsican. Indeed, such ideologies can be seen as transnational in nature and what one country in the EU concedes to its linguistic minority/ies can be seen to be reflected in some way by other EU countries at a later point in time. What is particularly interesting is that such political moves have their origins not from the 'top down' (as in many language planning initiatives) but result from pressure from the 'bottom up'.

Fieldwork reported on in this paper was carried out on a number of courses of a week's duration (or more) in a variety of locations in Brittany, held generally in the summer months (but not exclusively so). Above all, this choice of site was motivated by my own availability for fieldwork – as a full-time secondary school teacher, I had limited time to pursue such investigations in Brittany, and these courses were run mainly in the school holidays. My presence on such courses allowed me the direct experience of becoming a Breton speaker myself, which I was able to compare to similar situations in which I had participated in the past – similarly to some of these Breton courses, I had experience of ulpan programmes in the mid 1980s (in Welsh) and the early 2000s (in Hebrew).

The participants on these courses came, in the main, from various parts of Brittany, though not exclusively so. That the courses were run locally to some of the participants was an important factor – local 'authenticity' was, however, contested by other participants, from different parts of Brittany, and sometimes led to tension when their own 'authenticity' seemed to be overlooked, since they wanted dialectal forms from their areas included on the courses as well. A third group I identified (and to which I myself belonged) were those participants who came from outside Brittany altogether. This group can be further divided into those people who had Breton roots and connections (many participants from Paris and the south of France fell into this category) and those people with no connection to Brittany whatsoever. These included participants not only from other regions of France (such as the Basque country, the Auvergne and the Rhône-Alpes region) but also other western European countries (such as the UK, Belgium, Luxemburg and Italy).

The geographical origins of the teachers on these courses make for interesting reading. It was exceptional if a teacher came from the local area where the course was being held. Only in one case was a course teacher from the immediate area (Lorient 2003); he also stood out in that he had acquired Breton in an inter-generational family setting. Otherwise, teachers were not 'local' and came from places as diverse as Paris, the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Rennes and England. Apart from the teacher in Lorient (and two other teachers from all of the courses I attended and whose dialect differed from the area where they were teaching), all the teachers were néo-bretonnants. This is an important point to note. The current reproduction of the Breton language among adult learners of the language is by néo-bretonnants for néo-bretonnants. McDonald (1989) reports that similar situations exist in the immersion and bilingual school systems; most of the teachers there have also learned the language in adulthood. Despite the presence of a small number of L1 Breton teachers on the courses I attended, that the linguistic and cultural reproduction of the Breton language is firmly in the hands of the neo-speakers was not only plain to see, it is furthermore backed up by the literature on the subject (Jones 1998: 322; Ferguson 2006: 105).

Language ideologies are generally defined as a set of beliefs about the nature of language or about a particular language shared by the members of a defined community (Watts 1999; Milroy 2001). Such belief systems become so well embedded in the collective psychology of a particular group that they often come to form part of the widely accepted lore and language myths of the same group, as can be perceived as natural or self-evident (Boudreau and Dubois 2007). A critical sociolinguistic approach, which rejects the view of community, identity and language as natural and bounded phenomena and sees them rather as 'heuristic devices which capture some elements of how we organize ourselves, but which have to be understood as social constructs' (Heller 2007: 13) has also been used to identify and analyse prevalent language ideologies in this particular case of language endangerment.

Many minority languages are undergoing transformations similar to Breton at the start of the twenty-first century. Thus while the discussion focuses on one particular endangered language currently spoken in northwest France, the implications and the processes described here have a transnational dimension. Research into other situations of language endangerment seems to indicate a commonality among these processes which is not bounded by national frontiers (cf. Hornsby [2005] for similar phenomena in Basque and Galician).

The call for 'parity of esteem' for minority languages is based on a 'norm' located within two major language ideologies, that of standardisation and the legitimacy of monolingualism, which is 'taken as normal, and therefore as essential to linguistic and cultural development both at the level of the community and at the level of the individual' (Heller 2006: 85). Attempts to subvert the dominance of languages such as French and English is based on the principle of linguistic subordination, in which language varieties associated with socially subordinate groups are viewed as linguistic deficits rather than neutral linguistic differences (Lippi-Green 1997). The concept has been researched particularly well in Catalan sociolinguistics where it is known as the Catalan subordination norm (Vila 1996: 185). Traditionally in Catalonia, the rule that has prevailed between members of the two predominant linguistic groups is the convergence towards Spanish. This is so because both groups perceive Spanish as the neutral code, one that everyone understands and speaks, and so it is the language that offers more guarantees for success in interpersonal communication (de Rosselló i Peralta 2003). This situation is mirrored in many other situations of linguistic minoritisation in Europe (and indeed further afield) since it is human nature for us to try and adapt to our interlocutors as far as possible. This has been demonstrated by Giles et al. (1973) whose proposed interpersonal accommodation theory explains how interpersonal adaptation, or, in other words, linguistic convergence, follows social approval.

Le Monde Comme Si ('The World As If', or 'The World of Make-Believe') (Morvan 2002) gives expression to a provocative trend in French thinking about attempts to revitalise Breton (and other regional languages). In this book,

Morvan satirises the Breton cultural movement and refers to the 'futility' of fighting against the 'inevitable tide' of language shift. As someone who was previously closely involved with the Emsav ('cultural resurgence') Morvan can offer an insider's view, but also a view which is no longer inspired by ideologies prevalent among Breton-language revitalisers. The following passage typifies her position on using Breton as a means of communication:

> ... combien ai-je vu de parents s'évertuer à baragouiner un breton pénible pour échanger avec leurs enfants, combien ai-je vu d'enfants contraints à une véritable schizophrénie, parlant français chez eux mais breton à l'école, sans savoir pourquoi la charge de sauver une langue qui ne leur servirait jamais à rien leur incombait à eux. Etrange inversion de la situation tant dénoncée par les militants, qui amenait des enfants, interdits de parler français comme leurs aïeux avaient été interdits de parler breton, à expier la faute des ancêtres comme un péché originel. Obéir à l'injonction de parler la langue de mon peuple, c'était, dans ma famille, de le faire taire. (Morvan 2002: 24-25)

> (... how many parents have I seen attempt to babble painfully in Breton in order to communicate with their children, how often have I seen repressed children developing what can only be called schizophrenia, speaking French at home but Breton at school, without exactly knowing why the responsibility of saving a language which would never be useful to them should fall on their shoulders. In other words, a strange inversion of the situation so denounced by activists, whose children, prohibited from speaking French in much the same way as their older relatives had been prohibited from speaking Breton, were supposed to expiate the sins of the ancestors like some sort of original sin. Obeying the injunction to speak the language of my people was, in my family, to silence it.)

Morvan's title of *Le Monde Comme Si* vividly evokes the daily struggle *néo-bretonnants* face when using Breton: they act 'as if' Breton were a language of wider communication; 'as if' it is the done thing to transmit the language to their children; 'as if' Breton-language schooling for their children is just another educational choice. Morvan's stance on such 'as ifs' is thoroughly negative but I would argue that acting in such a way is a necessity if *néo-bretonnants* are to retain a sense of purpose in learning and using the Breton language.

Looking further afield, other minority groups are acting in similar ways to *néo-bretonnants* and nobody seems to be claiming they are play-acting. In a Welsh context, Trosset talks of the need of L2 Welsh speakers to 'seek to escape from their learners' status, which has now become, in effect, a social stigma' (Trosset 1986: 187).

A parallel situation exists in French-speaking Ontario, where one school clearly states:

> Toutes les activités, qu'elles soient purement scolaires ou qu'elles soient culturelles ou récréatives se déroulent en français. On attend également de vous que vous vous adressiez en français à vos enseignant-e-s et à vos condisciples; en classe et pendant toutes les activités scolaires et parascolaires. (Heller 2006 : 84)

> (All activities, whether strictly academic, cultural or recreational take place in French. We also expect you to speak in French to your teachers and your fellow students, in class and during all school-time and extra-curricular activities.)

Heller found that, despite the school's clear linguistic policy (one of 'as if' the school were in an overwhelmingly French-speaking province),

> ... while [pupils] collaborate with the construction of a French mono-lingual public face, they act out their bilingual experience of life, their bilingual identities and the value they place on bilingualism by performing bilingualism. This means using English, or occasionally both French and English, in the spheres which they consider to be private, under their control rather than that of the school. They therefore daily attack the integrity of the monolingual 'oasis culturel' that [the school] is supposed to be, while at the same time they need it in order to become the kind of bilinguals they want to be, and the school wishes for them. (Heller 2006: 114)

Such tensions are not surprising, given the top-down emphasis on monolingual language use and the equally powerful bottom-up pressure to communicate in, what is for them, an authentic way (i.e. bilingually and diglossically). The monolingual policy of militants who insist on using Breton at every opportunity, who make Breton the working language of their institutions and their homes,

much like Heller's school in the example above, recalls Jaffe's observation that in many minority language movements, 'legitimate and authorized identities are typically associated either with a monolingual norm or an ideal of balanced bilingualism' (Jaffe 2007: 50-51).

Thus some *néo-bretonnants* will carry language exposure out of the prevailingly monolingual Breton classroom and into everyday life. However, for other *néo-bretonnants*, the prevailing culture (i.e. French-speaking) will play a more central role in their language use, and 'hybrid bilingualism' (Heller 2000: 10) will emerge in the form of mixed language practices (i.e. Breton and French intertwined) and less than 'perfect' mastery of Breton. Problems arise because such practices do not fit in with the prevailing discursive emphasis on 'balance' (i.e. bilingualism as two parallel monolingualisms) which, as Jaffe points out:

> ...flies in the face of minority language communities' experience of language shift. It is extremely difficult for the individual to have 'balanced' competencies in two languages when those languages have vastly different statuses and uses in the surrounding society. Secondly, much remains unexamined with respect to the social meanings of 'balance'. (Jaffe 2007: 58)

Néo-bretonnants are no different from other people involved in immersion programmes all over the world, but the resulting (and natural) tensions which emerge because of the conflicting aims of additive and hybrid bilingualism have sometimes been seized upon by opponents to claim the world of *néo-bretonnants* is somehow 'inauthentic', as in the work of McDonald (1989) and Jones (1995, 1998), as well as Morvan (2002). I argue that this shows a lack of understanding of the transformations many minority languages are forced to undergo due to processes of 'High Modernity' (Giddens, 1991), which result in such tensions. These tensions are not created by the speakers themselves and to describe their efforts as 'inauthentic' is not only disingenuous, it fails to problematise the concept of 'authenticity'. Authenticity has different meanings for different groups and the stakes involved for each group will be different. Whose authenticity takes precedence is more a social and political matter than a linguistic one.

Language ideologies in action

Upon analysis of the fieldwork undertaken, it became apparent that language ideology played a large part in determining which language was used outside of the classroom. Only one course (out of the five I attended) was largely Breton-speaking outside lessons. All the extra-curricular activities were organised in Breton and as there was a large group of competent Breton speakers on the course, Breton was overwhelmingly used during the coffee breaks. The ideologies in force on other courses were more naturalistic and French generally played a larger part in informal transactions.

An important influence on whether Breton was used or not in such informal situations was the presence of what I have termed 'lead speakers'. Such people were identified by the rest of the group as fluent (if not always accurate) speakers of Breton, who generally spoke in Breton and expected to be addressed in that language. More research needs to be done on the psychological make up of these speakers, as there was no obvious correlation between their ethnic origins, gender and age and their personal language ideology.

Other factors determining whether Breton or French (or occasionally English) was used outside the classroom need to be taken into account. Beginner learners simply did not have the linguistic skills to participate in conversations in Breton and so French was their language of choice. In Welsh-speaking/ Welsh-learning circles, where 'the process of learning a new language temporarily takes away people's ability to talk, and the sense of inadequacy leads them to experience shame' (Trosset 1986: 184), learners often do not participate actively in conversations with more fluent speakers of Welsh. Reverence for the act of Welsh-speaking would be shown by adopting silence. Such behaviour would not be acceptable in Brittany, where people are more assertive in their rights to communicate in their language of choice. Thus in such situations, the emphasis is always content-focused, rather than medium-focused, as in comparative situations in Wales.

In two of the courses I attended, there was a small contingent of English people. In the case of two participants, they each had a parent from Brittany (though not Breton-speaking) and in the case of another participant, he had bought a house in the local area (but long before the current trend of British people buying a Breton pied-à-terre for weekend retreats) and wanted to get to know local culture better. It seemed natural for me, as a native English speaker, to communicate with them in English, even though two of them had high flu-

ency levels in Breton (one of them was the beginner-level teacher on one of the courses). This was because, I assume, people were identifying a certain language with particular individuals and it was that language in which that person was generally addressed. If it worked for the English speakers in the groups, then I am sure it worked in a similar way for people who were French-dominant. The only time such linguistic boundaries were fluid was with myself and a participant who had spent a lot of time in America and was keen to practise his English, though his linguistic behaviour was the subject of light-hearted teasing by other participants. 'Ur staj a saozneg eo?' ('Is this an English course?') they would ask him.

Perhaps the most direct example of a linguistic ideology based on monolingualism as the norm was in a document given out in one class about activities being organized in Breton in the local area. The document did not list such activities; rather, it was a 'call to arms' for people to organise the activities themselves and to ensure that the working language was Breton. The prevailing ideology was that people in Brittany should be able to participate in activities in Breton:

> Pet ha pet gwech all n'em eus klevet gant tud hag a vez poaniañ da zeskiñ hon yezh pegen start eo dezhe koazeal pa ne gavont den ebet evit en ober gante. E lec'h all e Breizh, eus Naoned da Vrest, en em gav an danvez brezhonegerien estroc'h e-pad ar c'henteliou.
>
> (Time and time again I have heard from people who have taken the time to learn our language about how difficult it is for them to find someone to speak to. All over Brittany, from Nantes to Brest, Breton speakers meet in order to use the language outside classes.)

The monolingual ideal is expressed in the following statement:

> Un reolenn hepken zo boutin d'an oll obererezhioù-mañ: pep tra e brezhoneg!
>
> (There's only one rule as far as all these activities are concerned: everything has to be in Breton!)

A certain sense of reality creeps in with the recognition that not everyone has the linguistic skills to live up to this ideal:

> Ober e brezhoneg ne dalv ket mestroniañ mat hon yezh dre ret met bezañ prest d'ober eus e seizh gwellañ evit na vefe nemet brezhoneg.
>
> (Using Breton does not necessarily mean mastering our language in itself but being willing to use Breton to the best of your ability.)

An interesting use is the term *hon yezh* ('our language') to designate Breton. Presumably, it is meant to make less competent users of Breton feel part of the neo-Breton community and to encourage and empower them in their use of the language. Such a technique recalls the situation in the southern Basque country, where local radio stations employ call-signs and station identifications in Basque as 'framing devices for the ensuing talk, establishing for the radio and its audience symbolic membership in an *euskaldun* ('Basque-speaking') public even if later, Castilian might be used' (Urla 2001: 153).

Conclusions

Néo-bretonnants find themselves having to make assertive linguistic choices and this is a feature shared with other linguistic groups throughout the world, not least in Quebec, where language legislation in the 1970s is making itself felt as French becomes the working language in domains where previously English was the norm. Heller points out that in such situations, speakers (or 'acteurs', as she terms them in this context), 'font fonctionner ces changements dans des directions qui correspondent non seulement à ce qui est possible, mais aussi à ce qui est à leurs yeux souhaitable' ('make these changes work in directions which not only correspond to what is possible, but also to what is desirable in their eyes') [Heller 2002: 73]. With predictions of two languages 'dying' every month (Crystal 2000), linguistic assertiveness such as that found among the néo-bretonnants indicates a rather more refreshing trend than among other linguistic minorities. That much of the linguistic practices will be 'hybrid' in Heller's sense of the word (i.e. a contradiction 'between the stigmatized but authentic vernacular ... and the emerging standard [language] which marginalizes vernacular-speakers' (Heller 2006: 24)) is one of the major challenges facing language revitalisers in Brittany at the present time.