

# **From the Periphery to the Centre: recent debates on the place of Breton (and other regional languages) in the French Republic**

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## 1. Introduction

That ‘there is – in the field of European languages – no contact situation which cannot be described as a linguistic conflict at the same time’ (Nelde 2007: 64) is particularly true for the French state and its approach to both regional and non-European minority languages. In this essay, I aim to explore the position of Breton in France from a contact linguistics perspective in Sections 2 and 3, by looking at the underlying language ideologies of both French and Breton in order to understand better the conflict which has arisen between them. Sections 4 – 7 examine this particular situation of linguistic conflict in more detail. Section 8 examines the phenomena which have led to internal linguistic conflict within the Breton speech community. Finally, Section 9 examines the concept of linguistic ownership and why this is problematic in a Breton setting.

## 2. French Language Ideologies

Much of French republican rhetoric on language (that is, the prevalent language attitudes on the part of the French state towards French and its relationship to minority languages in France) ‘is clearly chauvinistic and above all, alas, doomed to ineffectiveness since it is not based on a serious analysis of the situation’ (Calvet 1998: 187). Exposing the underlying ideology makes for uncomfortable reading. Bochman (1985: 119-129) has described features of French language policy, such as purism at the level of the national language, anti-dialectal centralism, nationalist centralism directed against national minorities and linguistic colonialism or expansionism outside the country’s frontiers, as fascist in nature. While such ideology is shared with totalitarian regimes, such as Mussolini’s Italy, Franco’s Spain or Hitler’s Germany, this does not mean the French republic in itself is a fascist state – clearly in so many other ways it is not. However, France’s overwhelmingly democratic political nature has given a veneer of respect to a language ideology that, in the totalitarian regimes mentioned above, has

been the subject, a posteriori, of legitimate criticism. As Calvet (1998: 187) points out, the differences in regard to the law relating to the use of French passed in 1975 are ‘differences of degree and not of kind’ when comparing democratic France with Fascist Italy, Spain and Germany.

This has led to rhetoric on the part of the French state that is contradictory and conflictual in relation to anything that is not standard French. Thus, while the international Agence de la Francophonie encourages, on one level, a pluralistic approach in respect of other languages and cultures (‘un monde pluraliste dans le respect des langues et des cultures’) and recognises that French sometimes co-exists with other national languages in French-speaking countries (‘au sein de l’espace francophone le français cohabite parfois avec d’autres langues nationales’), it nevertheless stresses that linguistic unity is to be preserved to the detriment of linguistic diversity:

Il est nécessaire que les diverses variantes de français qui sont parlées dans l’espace francophone ne diffèrent pas trop les unes des autres de façon à ce que le fondement linguistique soit le même pour tous et qu’il continue à jouer le rôle que les états membres lui ont attribué.<sup>1</sup>  
(Agence de la Francophonie 1997: 27)

Thus even though there have been recent developments which have seen the inclusion of minority languages in the French constitution (cf. Section 4), this does not signal any real change in the status quo; lip-service is paid to linguistic diversity in a politically correct manner, without there being any real political will to effect change in the status of regional languages in France, as I will show below. While the French state has recently expressed a seemingly positive attitude towards minority languages in France through the recognition of the same in Article 75 in the Constitution (July 2008), actions do not match rhetoric, and the continued absence of measures aimed at furthering the cause of these languages is noticeable.

### 3. Minority Language Ideologies

Language ideologies among linguistic minorities in France tend to reflect the prevailing republican focus on linguistic unity, to the extent that a recent

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<sup>1</sup> ‘It is vital that the diverse varieties of French which are spoken in the Francophone world do not differ too much among themselves so that the linguistic base is the same for all and that it continues to play the role which member states have assigned to it’ (my translation).

anthology on two minority language literatures, published by the education authorities in Montpellier and destined for use in schools, mirrors the supremacy of French. The volume, *Petite anthologie des littératures occitane et catalane* (Torreilles and Sanchiz 2006), when subjected to critical sociolinguistic analysis, reveals some interesting tensions. That it is a ‘small’ anthology is significant; the implication is that Occitan and Catalan are, in their turn, ‘small’ languages compared to French. Indeed, numerically they are, but this turn of phrase reinforces the inequality in status between French and regional languages in France. Also significant is that the introduction to the anthology is in French only. Pupils studying Occitan and Catalan literature in the south of France are able to understand – presumably – non-literary texts (such as introductions) in those languages as well. This same introduction reinforces the nature of the power relationship between Occitan, Catalan and French by talking in terms of a ‘patrimoine légué par ceux qui nous ont précédés’ (an ‘inheritance left by those who have come before us’) (p. 7); whereas this might legitimately describe the inclusion of literature in Occitan and Catalan composed by writers in previous centuries, where does that leave the contributions from contemporary writers? Are these too an historical ‘legacy’ or signs of a still vibrant cultural movement? The question of ownership of Occitan and Catalan arises when both their literatures are subsumed and absorbed into that of France: ‘Les langues de France ont toutes leur littérature. Ensemble celles-ci forment la littérature de France, l’une des plus belles et des plus puissantes du monde’<sup>2</sup> (Torreilles and Sanchiz 2006: 7). According to this ideology, literature written in Occitan and Catalan has no legitimacy without an over-riding reference to the French nation-state and its culture, even if much of the literature mentioned in the anthology was written when the French state had no political control over the regions in question. Fishman (1972: 9) has identified this process of ‘rewriting’ linguistic history when he says, ‘The past is being mined, ideologised, and symbolically elaborated in order to provide determination, even more than direction, with respect to current and future challenges.’

In Brittany, the same emphasis on linguistic assimilation into an idealised past is to be found among *néo-bretonnants* (L2 revivalist speakers

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<sup>2</sup> ‘The languages of France all have their own literatures. Together they form the literature of France, one of the most beautiful and powerful in the world’ (my translation).

of Breton) as McDonald (1989: 109) discovered: ‘The language does not exist external to the social context of its evaluation and use. The language is the values invested in it, or the values woven into it by its speakers. These values will differ considerably between traditional and neo-speakers. Thus traditional speakers of Breton will often fall short of the idealisation imposed on them by new speakers of the language, and the stereotypical sense of shame a traditional speaker has of his or her first language is not as clear-cut as activists often claim it is; this sense of shame has less to do with French educational policies and more to do with a ‘shame of Breton in specific social contexts, part of which may be the educated learner himself. When the learner or the militant is not there, Breton may again flourish, and will be without shame’ (McDonald 1989: 104).

#### 4. Language Conflict in France in the Twenty-First Century

Breton speakers have not, in themselves, been singled out for special treatment by the French Republic but have experienced, along with speakers of other regional languages, a common approach on the part of French officialdom. Historically as well as currently, the French state has had a ‘preoccupation with legitimating and institutionalising French as the “common” national language’ (May 2001: 157). This preoccupation stems from well before the Revolution and, in current terms, this same preoccupation has been systematically pursued via the education system up until the present day (May 2001: 157). This preoccupation was manifest in different ways, however. In pre-revolutionary France, language policy was, according to Jacob and Gordon largely absent: ‘A succession of royal courts of the Ancien Régime proved indifferent to the language spoken by their subjects’ (Jacob and Gordon 1985: 111) and even if the Ordonnance de Lyon (1540) enforced the use of French instead of Latin in all tribunals, this decree was not directed at ordinary people but at the bastardised Latin of administration. Le Roy Laudurie (1976: 12) reports that an incomplete administration of the provinces in the seventeenth century, ‘guaranteed the permanence of regional ethnic groups and decentralization by fact, if not by law’ (trans. Jacob and Gordon 1985: 112).

The administration of the Revolution inherited this multilingual situation a century later and had to face reality by translating all revolutionary decrees in local dialects and languages. In 1792, for example, the Assembly ordered the Ministry of Justice to translate laws into German,

Italian, Catalan, Basque and Breton ('en langues allemande, italienne, catalane, basque et bas bretonne') (Jacob and Gordon 1985: 113). Even Grégoire, often cited for his pronouncements on the need to confront anti-republican sentiment among minority linguistic populations, apparently supported a stable bilingualism which would serve the Republic. He states that these linguistic minorities:

... exist despite the railroads, and their disappearance would be very regrettable; the important thing is that all Frenchmen understand and speak the national language, without forgetting their individual dialects.

(In Gazier 1880: 297; trans. Jacob and Gordon 1985: 113)

The nature of the preoccupation with regional languages changed as the Jacobins felt the need to identify enemies of the Revolution as causes of its failure. Higonnet (1980: 49) observes that 'the persecution of dialects served two ends: first, it could be seen as a genuine step towards a more equal society; second, it diverted attention from more material social problems, like the redistribution of land.' However, the targeting of linguistic minorities in the Republic as a convenient scapegoat proved ineffectual: The Jacobins came to view these minority languages as an active threat to the Revolution and to the still fictive national form from which the Revolution claimed by its legitimacy. Yet the Revolution ... was no more able to assimilate these minorities than had been the royal administration which it inherited and expanded. Despite much-vaunted Napoleonic institutional reforms, the French state posed little threat to the underlying linguistic bedrock of France for nearly a century after the Revolution. (Jacob and Gordon 1985: 114)

A prevailing ideology about the inherent superiority of the French language, based on the achievements of the great French writers of the previous two centuries: the century of Reason (seventeenth century) and the Century of the Enlightenment (eighteenth century), dates from this time. Schieffelin and Charlier Doucet (1998: 300) claim that 'ideas of the clarity, exactness, logic, rationality, natural order, and richness of the French language as contributing to the greatness of French civilization' are current manifestations of this ideology; such ideas would explain the attitudes of some opponents to regional languages having a greater presence in the public life of the French state. These ideas have their roots in theories on the

nature of language developed during the Enlightenment. According to Higonnet (1980: 50), ‘much intellectual effort in France after 1760 was directed towards the understanding of language in general and to the nature of the superiority of French in particular ... being the most abstract, French was best able to convey with precision the more abstract thoughts of modern man.’ This ideology has persisted across the centuries, so much so that Oldenberg felt able to restate similar sentiments:

La langue française est si bien adaptée à l’expression des pensées les plus complexes, des nuances les plus subtiles que, depuis trois siècles – depuis Molière – rien n’a pu réellement l’entamer.<sup>3</sup>  
(Oldenberg 1984: 21)

Politically, France stands out as one of the most centralised states in Europe and one of the most resistant to the current trend towards the ‘reevaluation of “oppressed” cultures’ (May 2001: 37). It is thus an excellent example of a state providing the right conditions for language conflict to flourish. The distinct lack of political will in accommodating any but the most symbolic of regional demands has produced a contemporary situation where political activists in the north Basque country, Brittany, Savoy, north Catalonia, French Flanders, Occitania and Alsace, despite lacking any real collective political influence (notwithstanding recent opportunities at EU level for collaboration), are nevertheless united on one essential point, namely a collective criticism of the centralism of the French state (Chartier and Lapor 2002).

#### 4.1 Recent debates on the place of regional languages

Discussion over the apparently controversial move to recognise regional languages in the Constitution has come from a variety of quarters. In the debate in the *Assemblée nationale*, support for it was expressed by some members of the Socialist Party, such as Jean-Yves Le Drian, who saw it representing long overdue recognition and consideration (‘de la reconnaissance et de la considération’). His colleague, Marylise Lebranchu, saw it more in terms of reparation, making up for the negative linguistic policies of the Third Republic (‘une forme de réparation, par rapport au

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<sup>3</sup> ‘The French language is so well adapted to expressing the most complex thoughts and the most subtle of nuances that, for three centuries – since Molière in fact – nothing has been able to undermine it effectively’ (my translation).

combat mené contre les langues régionales sous la IIIe République’) (Ternisien 2008). Similar sentiments were expressed by Christine Albanel, the minister for culture and communication, who saw the proposal as matching current trends towards pluralism and transformation: ‘L’heure est au pluralisme. En matière de langage, la société française se transforme à vive allure, dans ses pratiques comme dans ses représentations’<sup>4</sup> (Assemblée nationale, 7 May 2008).

The difference between language attitudes and language ideologies is succinctly demonstrated here. Once Albanel had expressed a positive attitude towards regional languages in France, she went on to demonstrate an ideology based on standard (and monolingual) language in favour of French. While apparently lending supporting for the recognition of regional languages in France, she was opposed to this having any practical effect in public life:

Personne ne pourrait défendre l’idée d’une administration obligée de s’exprimer aussi dans la langue d’une région donnée, et qui recrute des fonctionnaires qui la maîtrisent<sup>5</sup>  
(Assemblée nationale, 7 May 2008).

Some members of the Assembly echoed this sentiment, notably Muriel Marland-Militello, who emphasized the estimated costs such recognition would bring and, who, in the process, revealed a similar ideology of standardisation:

Je suis opposée à ce que les langues régionales ou minoritaires deviennent des langues officielles de la République au même titre que le français. C’est pourquoi, outre les problèmes de coût que cela poserait, je trouve inutile de rendre obligatoire la traduction en langues régionales des lois ou des actes<sup>6</sup>  
(Assemblée nationale, 7 May 2008).

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Pluralism is in favour. As far as language is concerned, French society is being dramatically transformed, in its practices as well as in the way it is being represented’ (my translation).

<sup>5</sup> ‘No one can defend the idea of creating an administration which is forced to use the local language in a given region, and which recruits civil servants who are fluent in this language’ (my translation).

<sup>6</sup> ‘I am opposed to regional or minority languages becoming official languages of the Republic in the same way that French is. This is why, apart from the problems of finance this would cause, I find it useless to make the translation of laws or acts into regional languages compulsory’ (my translation).

A line of thought pursued by some Assembly members was to appeal to the general sense of endangerment of the French language in order to make common cause with endangered regional languages. For example, Jean Lasalle identified the current globalisation processes which are restricting the use of French internationally as the same processes which caused regional languages to decline half a century ago ('Le français est en train de s'écrouler comme les langues régionales ont commencé de le faire il y a cinquante ans.') He equated attempts to save regional languages with the protectionist policies adopted by French governments in the past: 'Soyons unis pour le défendre, tout en parlant toutes nos langues'<sup>7</sup> (Assemblée nationale, 7 May 2008).

A more virulent anti-regionalist sentiment was also apparent. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, was not only 'fier d'être jacobin' ('proud to be a Jacobin', i.e. a republican), he was also reported by *Le Monde* as calling immersion schools in Brittany 'religious sects' ('il avait traité de « sectes » les écoles Diwan qui pratiquent un enseignement bilingue français-breton') (Ternisien 2008). That Mélenchon is a member of the Socialist Party did not prevent him from holding different language ideologies to his colleagues Le Drian and Lebranchu, whose more positive attitudes are cited above.

Other opposing views were expressed by members of the speech communities directly affected by the proposals. Separatists in French Polynesia reportedly condemned the reform since it would mean their languages were becoming the property of France, revealing an essentially colonial attitude ('Elle signifie selon eux que les langues polynésiennes deviennent « la propriété de la France ». « Il s'agit d'une énième attitude colonialiste »') (Ternisien 2008).

Earlier opposition, when the proposal was first mooted in May 2008, was expressed by the Union of Breton Teachers who saw this amendment as tokenist. According to the Union, such moves would not increase the use of regional languages in public life by the state, nor would there be any obligation on the state to promote the teaching of regional languages (*Bremañ*, June 2008, p. 17).

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<sup>7</sup> 'Let us be united in defending [French], while still speaking all our [regional] languages' (my translation).

## 5. Language Conflict: an overview

Language ‘conflict’ (and indeed language ‘contact’), much like the notion of language ‘death’, are popular metaphors employed to help us make sense of particular linguistic behaviour on the part of groups of speakers. As such, ‘there is neither contact nor conflict between languages’ (Nelde 2007: 63), only between individual speakers and between speech communities. However, unlike the case of the language ‘death’ metaphor, I would argue that the notions of ‘contact’ and ‘conflict’ between languages (viz. speakers) is useful in that a language conflict can serve as a secondary symbol of other, less-exposed conflicts (for example, socio-economic, political and religious, *inter alia*) (Nelde 2007: 64). Thus the conflict arising from contact between the Breton and French languages had, as its origin, an internal political basis, whereby French was ‘associated with the equality element of the Republican trinity’ (Millar 2005: 83) but which has been reframed in recent years as adding to the external threat of multiculturalism. If, as Nelde (2007: 60) contends, speakers in the early 21st century are confronted with strong demands to move towards a “New Multilingualism”, one would imagine that the pre-existing multilingualism of a minority of French citizens is to be valued and promoted as a positive step towards this new era of multiple linguistic competencies. However, ‘the emphasis on diversity in France is a symbolically legal addendum to a centuries-old discursive construct based mainly on uniformity because this diversity appears mainly in texts of a very low degree of legal force’ (Määttä 2005: 182). This means that the French state can claim it is meeting European standards of multilingualism by adopting certain articles of Part III of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (which France signed in 1999 but cannot ratify because of its constitution, cf. Section 6 below). These ‘encourage’, ‘promote’ and ‘develop’ regional languages but do not affect the status quo, based on the 1951 Loi Deixonne, which allows ‘for the presence of regional languages in education, media, and cultural life as long as there is demand and the position of French and its speakers is not threatened’ (Määttä 2005: 178).

## 6. The Rhetoric of French Republicanism

France is a highly centralized state where possession of, and ability in, the ‘correct’ form of French is considered to be the chief marker of ‘Frenchness’. Even those who are bidialectal, or bilingual, are considered in some way unrepublican by many of their fellow citizens.

(Millar 2005: 24)

In recent years, the rhetoric used by proponents of the French republican policy on regional languages has shifted, but only in terms of a more moderate vocabulary. While the Barère report (1794) spoke of Basque-speaking fanatics, Italian-speaking counter-revolutionaries, German-speaking anti-republicans and Breton-speaking federalists, present-day opponents of any liberalisation of regional language policies are more likely to couch their arguments in terms of social division and separatism (Judge 2007: 22). Notwithstanding the problematic position regional languages in France occupy, the main threat nowadays is seen to come from the encroachment of global English on French public discourse. For example, the 1992 change to the Constitution made French the only official language of the Republic (and thereby rendering it impossible for France to ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages) and in 1999 the Loi Toubon was passed to impose the use of French in a number of contexts (such as retail, business transactions and science and technology) (Judge 2007: 23). Both were a reaction to increasing globalisation and the related increased use of English; however, the amended Essay 2 of the Constitution has been used to delegitimise Breton-language immersion schools and reject Diwan’s demands for integration into the state education system (Judge 2007: 135).

Multiculturalism is viewed negatively in republican rhetoric, where organised minority or special interest groups are seen as divisive in terms of a French collectivist sentiment. This does not affect just linguistic groups: Grossman and Miclo (2002) see the rise of ‘new tribes’ based on culture, region, age, social class, religion, sexual orientation, gender and ethnic origin as equally divisive. From the end of the 1980s, a crisis has emerged centred on the ‘Republican model of integration’ and against a backdrop of liberalism in the economic sphere, where republican values of ‘Liberty, Equality and Fraternity’ and a sense of universalism based on uniformity are

seen as under threat. In recent times, France has seen a rise in particularism and calls for recognition of 'collective identities' (republican rhetoric for 'minorities'), coupled with an increase in individualism (Wieviorka 2000). France is obviously not exceptional in experiencing such trends, but reactions to them on the part of the French state do stand out as particularly defensive. Moreover, as stated before, linguistic conflicts can act as the symbolic focal point for other struggles. Any concessions on the linguistic front will encourage other groups to demand their own rights in turn.

This can best be demonstrated by reference, once again, to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. When the French government signed the Charter in May 1999, it simultaneously issued a statement which interpreted the Charter as promoting Europe's linguistic heritage rather than recognising and protecting minorities and as not conferring collective rights to the speakers of regional or minority languages (Määttä 2005). This rationale was similar to that evoked by those who claim that privileging multilingualism in the European Union is a hindrance to the development of a European public sphere (e.g. Wright 2001: 79, 87; Määttä 2005). Further tokenist support was given when France specified seventy-five languages spoken on French territory which meet at least some of the criteria for being considered a regional or minority language, effectively making a mockery of the whole process, since 'some [regional language] activists saw it as a stab in the back, because it seemed to turn their case into ridicule' (Judge 2007: 142). Why is it, then, that the French state is so defensive when it comes to regional and minority languages?

## 7. The ‘Threat’ Of Breton And Other Regional Languages

Puisque les Basques et les Bretons,  
les Alsaciens, les Occitans,  
les Corses, les Chtimis, les Wallons,  
ils veulent tous être indépendants,  
puisque ils veulent tous l’autonomie,  
qu’a priori ils n’ont pas tort,  
ben c’est décidé moi aussi,  
j’prends ma guitare et j’crie bien fort  
que j’suis l’séparatiste du 14<sup>e</sup> arrondissement,  
l’autonomiste de la Porte d’Orléans.<sup>8</sup>

Renaud, ‘Le blues de la Porte d’Orléans’ (cited in Chartier and Larvor 2002: 4)

Renaud’s song, dating from 1977, was recently complemented by a film entitled *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* (Boon 2008), marketed in the UK under the title of ‘Welcome to the Sticks’. Both aim to mock, albeit gently, any notion of difference based on linguistic and/or regional affiliation. The film has local characters working in a Nord-Pas-de-Calais post office united in their resistance to the arrival of a new boss from the south of France, sent north as punishment for misconduct. Much is made of the lack of comprehension of the local Picard dialect (known as *ch’ti*), which is mocked to the point of caricature. As gentle as this comedy may be, the theme does point to a tendency in French political thinking not to take matters such as local dialects and languages seriously. Commentators such as Hicks have pointed to the French state’s apparent inability to cope effectively with the modern realities of multiculturalism and multilingualism, despite President Sarkozy’s declarations<sup>9</sup> that France must modernise in order to deal successfully with globalisation (Hicks 2008). France loses all credibility

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Since the Basques and the Bretons,/ the Alsatians and the Occitans,/ the Corsicans, the Picards, the Walloons,/ all want to be independent,/ since they all want regional autonomy,/ and in principle, they’re not wrong,/ well, I’ve decided that I too/ will take up my guitar and shout out loud/ that I am the separatist of the 14th district,/ the autonomist of the Porte d’Orléans’ (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Une grande patrie est faite d’une multitude de petites patries, unies par une formidable volonté de vivre ensemble’ (‘A great country is made up of a multitude of small countries, united in their will to live together’; my translation) Sarkozy, 9 March 2007, cited in Assemblée nationale, 7 May 2008.

globally in its oft-heard complaints that French should be promoted in the face of the increasing use of English, as Hagège (1996: 33) has pointed out:

Il est clair que si [le français] demande à être pris en considération par l'ensemble des Européens, il ne peut pas en même temps continuer de s'imposer d'être dans le sillage jacobin de l'oppression infligée aux langues qu'il a au sein de son territoire national. En d'autres termes, si cette contradiction n'est pas dépassée, le français ne peut pas jouir de la crédibilité à laquelle il aspire à l'échelon de l'Europe et du Monde.<sup>10</sup>

France is also in a contradictory position because it has ratified the Lisbon Treaty. This particular treaty, which will come into force if ratified by all European member states, requires that the latter respect cultural and linguistic diversity (Art. 2.3), while the attached Charter of Fundamental Rights (Art. 21) prohibits discrimination on the grounds of language, ethnicity or membership of a national minority (Hicks 2008).

#### 7.1 Threats from within France

Minority languages in France can be perceived as a 'threat' to national unity on a number of levels, be they historical or ideological. The spectre of collaboration during World War Two still haunts French society, not least the role Breton nationalists were playing during that period. Despite immediate post-war declarations that the number of Breton autonomists involved with the *Bezenn Perrot*, the military wing of the Parti National Breton (and active collaborators during the occupation), was 'very limited' (Ministère de l'Intérieur 1944), the fact that any Breton nationalists had collaborated was enough to lead to exaggerated claims by members of the Resistance; French communists thought that the numbers involved were much greater, claiming that there were 2,000 PNB *Maquisards* in Finistère alone (*Front* 1944). All in all, only 150 Breton nationalists were interned after the war (Biddiscombe 2001: 835). But that figure is enough to ensure suspicion of nationalist motives (including linguistic ones) up until the present day. The matter is complicated by what Sowerwine (among others)

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<sup>10</sup> 'It is obvious that if the French language is asking to be taken seriously by all Europeans, it cannot at the same time continue to set itself in the Jacobin wake of the oppression inflicted on the languages that it has in the heart of its national territory. In other words, if this contradiction is not overcome, French will not be able to enjoy the credibility to which it aspires at the European and world scale' (my translation).

has termed the myth of ‘resistancialism’ (Sowerwine 2001: 229), propagated by de Gaulle, who claimed only ‘a few traitors may have directly served the enemy’ with ‘the immense mass of the French [having been] combatants brought together to serve the fatherland’ (Sowerwine 2001: 229). This stands in marked contrast to Monnier’s assertion that some 40,000 Frenchmen were to be found in German uniform during the occupation (Monnier 2007). In this climate of denial, which allowed the French ‘to forge a consensus that enabled them to avoid confronting the extent of collaboration for three decades’ (Sowerwine 2001: 229), republicans were free to express exaggerated claims over the nature of Breton nationalist collaboration without resorting to inconvenient factual evidence. Such claims undoubtedly reverberate in French popular memory nowadays when the focus is on Breton language matters.

## 7.2 Threats from outside France

Post-war clashes with the United States fed republicans’ sense of insecurity. The ‘Coca-colonisation’ of France in the 1950s (Sowerwine 2001) led to resistance to the notion of ‘Americanisation’, seen as ‘the uneven distribution of prosperity and the sense that something quintessentially French was being lost’ (Sowerwine 2001: 280). The American principle of communitarism, which ‘claims that certain groups of people are not treated equally by the state, that their differences need to be acknowledged and accommodated’ (Cairns 2000: 92), is to be resisted, in republican terms, at all costs as an American import.

The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a number of social crises in France, largely due to ‘failure of social measures ... with regard to housing, integration or education’ (Moïse 2007: 227) and the general sense of a breach of social contract, since ‘granting public equality does not take into account the daily discrimination, the setting of distances, the marginalisation processes’ (Moïse 2007: 227). The discourse of endangerment to the French language has shifted during this period away from the threat of international English, regional languages and spelling reforms to ‘the cultural links with Mediterranean countries, often identified and stigmatised through their religion, indeed through dialectal Arabic’ (Moïse 2007: 225). Consequently, an equally powerful threat to match that of the maintenance of regional languages is the contact situation the French language currently occupies with immigrant languages, most particularly the

Arabic of the Maghreb. Caubet (2004: 142) reports, using census data, that 25% of the families surveyed throughout France (out of a total of 380, 000 families) by INSEE and INED spoke a language other than French to their pre-school children. Such findings have generated new tensions in France which in turn have reinforced ideologies of French as a dominated or threatened language. In February 2001 dialectal Arabic was removed from the list of approved languages for the baccalauréat (Moïse 2007: 231) and three years later, the Bénisti report castigated mothers in France who chose to speak a language other than French to their children: ‘Elles devront s’obliger à parler le français dans leur foyer pour habituer leurs enfants à n’avoir que cette langue pour s’exprimer’<sup>11</sup> (Benisti 2004 : 9). Parents who refused to take such advice were to be reported to the local authorities: ‘Si cette mère persiste à parler son patois l’institutrice devra alors passer le relais à un orthophoniste’<sup>12</sup> (Benisti 2004 : 9).

Thus the emphasis on ‘danger’ from within the Republic has been reinforced by discourses on ‘danger’ from the outside, and away from the linguistic to the cultural, though the two are inexorably linked, of course: ‘Linguistic tensions are now accompanied by strong cultural and religious tensions, brought to light especially in the school system as reproducer of the social order’ (Moïse 2007: 233). This has led to the law which was passed on 15 March 2004 banning the conspicuous demonstration of religious affiliation in public schools and colleges. France’s adherence to a rigid ‘abstract universalism’ (Khosrokhavar 1997) appears anachronistic in a modern age where ‘the republican model no longer seem[s] to build a unified citizenry in the public space. The airtight separation between the two spaces, private and public, is an ideological construct which no longer has any great hold on reality’ (Moïse 2007: 225). As Bourdieu notes, ‘it is indeed, paradoxically, just as they are mobilising to demand universal rights which are effectively refused them, that symbolic minorities are called back to the order of the universal’ (in Eribon 1998). Again, the notion of being un-republican is used to counteract demands for political and societal equality on the part of minority groups, be they based on sexual orientation

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<sup>11</sup> ‘They should force themselves to speak French at home in order to accustom their children to having only this language with which to express themselves’ (my translation).

<sup>12</sup> ‘If this mother persists in speaking her jargon, the teacher should then alert a speech therapist’ (my translation).

(to which Bourdieu was referring in the above quotation) or linguistic orientation, the focus of the present essay.

## 8. Internal Linguistic Conflict in Brittany

Language conflict arises in Brittany not just through the interface between French, Breton and Gallo (Brittany's historic Romance variety – see Hornsby and Nolan (in press) for more details). Within the Breton speech community, Breton speakers are in conflict over what constitutes 'the' Breton language. Much is made of the highly dialectalised nature of Breton. Such linguistic behaviour is documented and described as located in a concept of 'badume', from the Breton meaning 'round here' ('ba du-mañ') (Le Dû and Le Berre 1995: 16). This sociolinguistic concept is based on difference: local speech needs to be different from what is said down the road, or in the next village, and the fact that neighbouring villages have more in common, linguistically speaking, than alleged differences are to be overlooked. Consequently, the concept acts as a local consensus on linguistic behaviour and not some norm imposed from the outside (Le Dû and Le Berre 1995: 16). This makes it difficult for a learner of the language to know exactly what form to adopt. McDonald (1989: 169) reports that it is *de rigueur* for learners to truncate 'Breton in imitation of popular speech. This is not necessarily done with a mastery of any local system, but with a consciousness of missing out letters from the printed word, and of shedding intellectuality for popular authenticity'. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that attempts have been made to codify the language, in order to make it more accessible for L2 learners. However, standardised forms are not readily acceptable to traditional speakers of the language and leads to passive resistance on the part of traditional speakers, who seen signs of 'inauthenticity' in such speech. Some linguists see the standardised form – neo-Breton – as a pseudo-norm not backed by any political or institutional strength (Le Dû and Le Berre 1999: 18). The Breton speech community as a whole is not united in its use of and attitudes towards the language and some of the more extreme negativity towards Breton is expressed by its remaining native speakers, as in the agricultural worker, quoted in Guinard's 2001 documentary on the Breton language, who wished 'Breton had never existed' (my translation).

Often overlooked in discussions of minority language rights in Brittany is the precarious position Gallo occupies in the eastern part of

Brittany. Research shows that Gallo is even more endangered, in numerical and revitalisation terms, than is Breton (Nolan 2008). There appears to be little common ground between the speech communities and indeed Gallo's status as one of the languages currently spoken in Brittany (and hence a 'Breton' language) is liable to be challenged by activists working exclusively in the domain of (Celtic) Breton revitalisation:

The Gallos stressed that they had common cause with the Breton movement against French centralism, but the Breton militants were clearly not going to share that cause in Brittany. Gallo could not be a 'proper language', they said, since it had no unity and no orthography other than French.

(McDonald 1989: 142)

Language conflict in Brittany is, then, not just a simple juxtaposition of French versus Breton. It is most often the speakers of standard (neo) Breton who come into conflict with state linguistic policies based on official monolingualism as enshrined in the Constitution. Traditional speakers of Breton are, in the main, little affected by the same state policies, as they operate in a well established system of diglossia, with the 'badume' as the Low variety and standard French as the High variety (Le Dû and Le Berre 1999: 19). Though Gallo and Breton revitalisers share an outwardly common cause, little is done jointly to work towards common aims. This is not to mention the other, non-European languages spoken by Brittany's inhabitants which attract even less attention in the literature than does Gallo. That they are mentioned at all in the French government's statement which accompanied the signing of France of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is not so much a call for linguistic equality on the part of the French state as an attempt 'to divide and rule'.

## 9. The Problem of Linguistic Ownership

Linguistic conflict often results when competing claims are made as to who 'owns' a language. One would presume that, insofar as any language can be 'owned', it is the speakers who produce the language who are the 'owners'. However, it is not always that simple. This section examines a variety of claims on linguistic ownership which have resulted in conflict in a number of situations of contact. I examine first of all claims that Breton is part of

France's linguistic heritage (9.1), then claims within the Breton speaking community as to which variety of Breton should be spoken (9.2).

### 9.1 Breton as part of France's linguistic heritage

In an attempt to make the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages more palatable to republican ideology, the problem of territoriality was circumvented by the lawyer Guy Carcassonne when making the case for France signing the Charter: regional languages, such as Breton, were part of France's linguistic heritage and therefore belonged to the whole of the French nation, not just the Bretons (Judge 2007: 142). The concept of territoriality is particularly problematic from a republican point of view, given that France is 'one and indivisible'. A similar line of argument was pursued by Cerquiglini in his report (commissioned by the French government, prior to signing the Charter). As well as avoiding territoriality (as in the term 'langue régionale'), he furthermore avoided the notion of minority (a term not favoured in republican vocabulary) by changing 'langue minoritaire' into 'langue de France' ('a language of or belonging to France') (Judge 2007: 142). The clear implication is that if the French states 'owns' the language, then it can deal with it as it sees fit; in other words, the status quo can be preserved. What regional language activists say, or do, is of little consequence, since they do not have the final word, either politically and morally, heritage being a domain of the state.

Even more bizarrely, attempts have been made to subsume regional languages under the French language. In a legal framework, the media in France are required to support 'French works' and Decree no. 90-66 (17 January 1990) covers works in both French and the regional languages. Forty per cent of all songs on French radio have to be in French, which includes regional languages. Law no. 2000-719, a modification of the above decree, specifies that since regional languages are part of the French cultural and linguistic heritage in all its regional and local diversity ('patrimoine culturel et linguistique dans sa diversité régionale et locale') (Judge 2007: 136), they can be used in radio broadcasts. Decree no. 95-110 explicitly states that 'original works in the French language includes since 1990 works in the regional languages' (Judge 2007: 137). For speakers of regional languages, this creates a number of tensions. Whilst apparently protecting the legal status of regional languages in the media, it allows for tokenist gestures towards the languages in question (for example, the television

channel France 3, whose explicit mission is the preservation of France's cultural and linguistic heritage, broadcasts between just a few minutes to a few hours per week in Alsatian, Basque, Occitan, Provençal, Catalan, Corsican and Breton). Furthermore, such an approach is rife with contradictions: if the 'langues de France' belong to the whole of the French nation, then why are these programmes broadcast only in the regions where they are traditionally spoken? As with any minority group, speakers of regional languages are not just confined to specific areas; take, for example, the large Breton community in Paris which has established a Breton-language immersion school in the capital. Such practices furthermore operate in a framework of territoriality which was one of the objections the French state had initially towards signing the Charter.

## 9.2 Who 'owns' the Breton language?

Contested claims as to who speaks for the Breton language are not just found at national level. I have already shown how conflict has been a characteristic of attitudes of traditional and *néo-bretonnants* towards each other (Section 8). Language conflict also arises in and between these different groups of speakers. As I have shown, traditional Breton speakers will resolve their local linguistic differences by avoiding the issue altogether, and switching to the high language, namely French. Neo-Breton speakers' own linguistic behaviour can stand out as defensive and occasionally patronising when it comes to more traditional speakers of the language, as Pentecouteau has noted:

Lors de travaux d'observation, j'ai entendu des militants très investis dans l'emsav dire attendre la disparition totale des bretonnants de naissance afin de pouvoir travailler sans ce 'fardeau' ... l'action des nouveaux locuteurs ne porte pas ou peu à valoriser une connaissance encore vivante.<sup>13</sup>

(Pentecouteau 2002: 175)

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<sup>13</sup> 'While engaged in observational work, I have heard some activists who are very committed to the Breton movement say that they are waiting for the total disappearance of native Breton speakers so that they can work without this "burden" ... the behaviour of new speakers does little or nothing to validate an already existing knowledge of the language' (my translation).

Pentecouteau further notes that *néo-bretonnants* rarely seek out native speakers when learning Breton and that, consequently, the Breton language is developing on the margin of native speakers' practices ('se développe en marge des usages que font les bretonnants de naissance') (Pentecouteau 2002: 53). In other words, neo-Breton is a language which seems to have been created against the will (or at least without the participation) of native Breton speakers ('le néo-breton est une langue qui aurait été créée contre la volonté (en tout cas sans la participation) des bretonnants de naissance') (Pentecouteau 2002: 176). While it is an exaggeration to claim that traditional and *néo-bretonnants* are not in fact speaking the same language (Jones 1998: 321), it is difficult to refer to the Breton speech community without reference to this tension, since the points of reference and linguistic and cultural acquisition are different for the two groups, thus leading to conflict among them.

Things are even more complicated when it comes to inter-group differences between *néo-bretonnants*. The Breton language stands out as a prime example of failed standardisation. Various reforms have been initiated to provide one standardised form of spelling, in order to overcome the nineteenth century custom of writing either according to the phonology of the north-west dialect (Leon) or the south-east dialect (Gwened). Three tendencies have developed, according to the language ideologies of the groups of writers who align themselves to one particular orthographic system:

1. University Orthography. Among the chief exponents of this spelling system are Le Dû and Le Berre, of Brest University, mentioned above, who have little patience for the neo-Breton movement. Local, dialectal forms are prioritised in this system since the future of Breton has not been thought out in its entirety ... but only on the scale of the district or of the village ('l'avenir du breton n'est pas pensé dans sa totalité ... mais à l'échelle du canton, voire de la commune') (Le Besco 1997: 30). It is used, in addition at the University of Brest, in bilingual units and classes in state and Catholic primary and lower-secondary schools.
2. Interdialectal Orthography. The writers who use this particular spelling system have a similar stance to the proponents of the University Orthography, in their attempts to reproduce traditional language forms, with local pronunciation systems acting as a norm

(Le Besco 1997: 30). In fact, the system is little used outside the circle of writers for the journal *Ar Falz*, based in Morlaix.

3. Zechadeg or Peurunvan ('completely unified') orthography. This is the mostly widely used Breton spelling system in Brittany, being the orthography of most Breton literature and journals and of the immersion school movement (Diwan). The writing system gained notoriety in 1941 when it was decided to represent the evolution of the historical phoneme /θ/<sup>14</sup> with a single grapheme. The year 1941 is not without significance; as Press says, the system 'is much maligned because of suspicions regarding the circumstances of its "creation" during the occupation' (Press 1986: 5).

Thus internal divisions are clearly discernible among Breton speakers when they write in the language. Whatever spelling they use can either align or distance them from at least three ideological positions. Even though the spelling systems are not so vastly different that any Breton speaker, with practice and patience, can read a text written in any of these systems, such a situation causes contention when detractors claim the language is fragmented to the extent that several spelling systems are needed in order to write it, depending on the dialect ('morcelée au point que l'on a besoin d'avoir recours à plusieurs orthographes pour l'écrire, selon le dialecte') (Le Besco 1997: 29). When Press noted in 1986 that 'a single [Breton] spelling system is indispensable' (p. 4), much can be inferred about the nature of the internal linguistic conflict within the Breton speech community that, some twenty or so years on, the matter is still not resolved. Whereas Le Besco (1997: 34) reports that Zechadeg ('unified') spelling is the most widely used system in Brittany, it is closely rivalled by University Orthography, since that is the system the French government has decided should be used in state and Catholic bilingual schools in Brittany.

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<sup>14</sup> This phoneme (found also in Cornish and Welsh and hence a characteristic of P-Celtic) evolved into /z/ in the speech of north-western and central speakers of Breton, and into /x/, /h/ and /χ/ in south-eastern speech. The grapheme proposed was <zh> to represent this z/h opposition (e.g. 'kaz' 'cat' in most of Brittany but 'kah' in the south-east became 'kazh'). Confusingly, its use was – incorrectly – extended to include a z/Ø opposition. This opposition has nothing to do with the /θ/ phoneme, but is based on another phoneme, /ð/. This phoneme, which is also characteristically P-Celtic, tends to be lost in south-east and central dialects, but is rendered /z/ in the north-west. Forms such as 'kouzehañ' in peurunvan is 'koueza' 'to fall' in most of Brittany but 'kouchein' in the south-east (the Welsh cognate 'cwyddo', where 'dd' = /ð/, shows the original phonemic basis of the word). This renders the peurunvan form etymologically incorrect (Le Besco 1997: 34).

## 10. Conclusions: Linguistic Conflict and Language Ideologies

Majority and minority language ideologies, in the case of France at least, are the mirror reflections of each other and inevitably lead to conflict. That they are not complementary has been already demonstrated; but, if more proof is needed, recent legal developments show that these tendencies are firmly entrenched. The vote in the French senate on 21 July 2008 to include the clause ‘Regional languages are part of France’s heritage’ in Essay 75 of France’s Constitution was greeted by some activists with ‘great satisfaction’ (Hicks 2008) but such moves remain symbolic while the French state remains unwilling to ratify the Charter. Given the claim on the part of the French Academy that inclusion of regional languages in the Constitution would ‘undermine national identity’ (Hicks 2008) such rhetoric inflames and aggravates the existing linguistic conflict in France, a conflict where the different parties are not equally matched. Linguistic domination is a policy which can be altered; conflict among France’s linguistic communities is not in any way inevitable.<sup>15</sup> First of all, ideologies based on the need to dominate (even if due to perceived linguistic insecurity on the part of the French Academy) engender ‘symbolic violence’, through which legitimacy is imposed ‘by concealing the power relations’ of the force which imposes them (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 4). Such symbolic violence can be addressed by the French State – and indeed, as Ní Chinnéide (in Hicks 2008) points out, should be addressed by a democratic state whose rhetoric includes the concept of equality:

[The] EBLUL [European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages] believes it is high time that France puts an end to its policy of destruction of its autochthonous languages that has undermined its credibility both in Europe and internationally, and that concrete measures be taken quickly to translate this recognition into realities.  
(Ní Chinnéide 2008)

In any situation of conflict, there have to be two or more sides with competing claims and the language ideologies of minorities within the French state can hinder their own positions. By attempting to compete on the same terms as those espoused by the State, and by adopting what Lafont

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<sup>15</sup> Compare, for example, the federalist model of Spain, or the devolutionary model of the United Kingdom, where linguistic minorities have been granted much more political power recently than was historically the case.

(1986) has termed the ‘Sociolinguistics of the Periphery’ (a centre-periphery model of political and economic relations, cf. Hechter 1975), linguistic minorities within the French state play the conflict ‘game’ by their adversary’s rules. Le Nevez has proposed, in an as yet unpublished paper, an alternative model, suggesting that emphasis (and the efforts of language activists) needs to be transferred to the domains where Breton is currently still in a strong position, and moved away from concentrating on the perceived defects of Breton compared to French. As a consequence of the latter approach, the current linguistic conflict has resulted in a situation comparable to the one Haugen observed in Norway: ‘The result of the language movement has so far been to create an image in “schizoglossia”, a personality split which leaves many persons linguistically divided and uncertain’ (Haugen 1996: 276). More emphasis on the areas where Breton speakers feel comfortable using the language would not only bolster their own linguistic self-confidence, it would also provide a more solid basis from which to expand into currently monolingual French linguistic domains.

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