

Breton – an endangered language of Europe

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The Breton Language is a Celtic Language

The Breton language is one of dozens of “lesser used” languages in Europe. It’s a Celtic language. There are five others: Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic, Manx, Welsh, and Cornish (yes, it is alive contrary to many things one will read). Some people also include Galicia and Asturias (in Spain) in the family of Celts. While these regions have a Celtic identity based on history and traditional culture, they do not have Celtic languages, although the languages spoken in those regions today are unique.

When you hear the word “Celtic” today in the U.S., it is mostly thrown about to sell something Irish or Scottish ... a music CD or festival. The noun “Celt” or adjective “Celtic” is more precisely used to apply to people, places or things where there is a link to a Celtic language. More broadly it refers to the cultures of the places where those languages have been found.

So why is there a Celtic language in France?

I am not a historian but we need to start with a little history to situate Brittany and the Breton language. This is a very simplistic summary. To understand Brittany today, it is important to study its history in much more depth.

Celts were being distinguished as a separate people by historians in the 8th through 1st centuries BC based on social organization, dress, warfare methods, and especially language. Ancient Celts spread westward from the Danube Valley and a presence in Brittany was noted by the La Tene period in 500 BC. The Gauls of this period (the Latin name for people called Keltoi in Greek) were a set of various peoples. Caesar named five different Celtic nations in Brittany – then called “Armorica”.

The Romans invaded Brittany in the first century BC. The Celts fought them but were defeated. The Roman presence in Brittany was peaceful and this was a period when roads and towns were built. During the 5th and 6th century especially, but also before this, there was a great deal of travel between Celtic peoples in Britain and Armorica – especially by early Christians who were both spiritual and political leaders. The shift to the name Brittany bears witness to this travel.

This is a complicated period with settlement of a great number of Celts from Wales, Cornwall and Devon, as well as Ireland, in Brittany. This was a period of uneasy relations between the Franks (French) and Bretons. During the 5th to 7th centuries there was constant warfare on the borderlands which are now roughly the same as the present day border between Brittany and France.

Brittany was made up of several principalities – united only in the 9th century under Nominoe who fought to keep Brittany independent. Brittany as a kingdom under Nominoe marked the peak expansion of the Breton language, but Brittany was never all Breton speaking. Those in the east spoke Gallo, an outgrowth of late Latin influenced by the Celtic language spoken by the Gauls. It developed in parallel to the French dialects now spoken elsewhere in France: that of Paris, and also Picard, Normand, Angevin, Manceau and Poitevin. Gallo is unique, but not a Celtic language.

The Breton nobility had trouble accepting a king. The 10th to 12th centuries were marked by internal battles where Breton dukes fought each other for dominance. Competing alliances with England or France meant that the end of independence would be inevitable.

During the 12th through 17th centuries Breton nobility and higher clergy adopted French as a more international language, and cities in Brittany became largely French-speaking (although also Breton speaking). To be urban has long been viewed as equivalent to speaking French.

Thus, French was the language used by an urban elite while Breton and Gallo were languages of the countryside and smaller towns. Brittany has always been multilingual. The boundary of Brittany is not determined by the correspondence of the Breton language to a particular geographic realm, but by early religious and political boundaries – bishoprics were also administrative areas overlaid by territories claimed by Breton Dukes.

Brittany was annexed to France in 1532 through complex marriage alliances. But it retained some important independence with a parliament, and control over taxes and army conscription. Brittany was brought into the French nation-state with the French Revolution in 1789. That was the beginning of a political centralization that would force people in France to become French, and thus good citizens.

We'll get back to that idea in looking at the changing situation of the Breton language.

Just how many people speak the Breton language?

The French government has never included questions about languages in its census so until recent times when some fairly reliable surveys have been taken, it has been difficult to know exactly how many people spoke Breton at any given period of history.

In 1914 it is said that over 1 million spoke Breton west of the border between Breton and Gallo-speaking regions – roughly 90% of the population of the western half of Brittany. In 1945 it was about 75%, and today, in all of Brittany the most optimistic estimate would be that 20% of Bretons can speak Breton. Brittany has a population of roughly 4 million -- if you include the department of Loire-Atlantique which the Vichy government chopped off from "official" Brittany in 1941. Three-quarters of the estimated 200 to 250,000 Breton speakers using Breton as an everyday language today are over the age of 65. What does that say about the future for Breton?

How did the numbers of Breton speakers dwindle?

Image is everything, and this has to do with why Bretons at a certain period in history decided they must speak French and spare their children knowledge of the Breton language.

Image No. 1: Breton is a rural, backward-looking, un-modern language fit only for the barnyard.

Fañch Elegoët, a Breton sociologist, did an extensive study of rural Breton speakers in northwestern Brittany in the 1960s and 70s – primarily through oral histories. He found that Bretons had internalized the following view of Breton:

Breton Is a peasant patois, unable to insure communication even with the neighboring village, even more incapable of expressing the modern world – the world of tractors, automobiles, airplanes and television. A language only good enough to talk to cows and pigs. From that you get the refusal to transmit this language

to children – a language considered to be a burden, a handicap in social promotion, a source of humiliation and shame (Elegoët 1978)

Because Bretons learned to feel that the Breton language was vastly inferior to French, many parents in post World War II Brittany made the decision to do everything possible to insure that their children spoke French – that meant using French when at all possible to speak to children in the home. This meant that you had households where grand parents spoke only Breton, parents spoke Breton and some French, and children spoke only French (although they could understand some Breton even if discouraged from speaking it themselves, for their own good). Thus children were being cut off from grandparents and older relatives. Imagine a family gathering where all the adults are conversing and telling funny stories in Breton. You're 12 and you can follow a little bit of it, but feel very much left out of the fun because you can't get the jokes and you can't express yourself in Breton.

But parents firmly believed that social and economic progress for their kids was dependent on mastering French and abandoning Breton.

How did that conviction come about? - The schools played a big role

In 1863, one-fifth of people of France spoke no French at all. You didn't need it. You stayed in school only a very short time and then worked on the farm and rarely traveled far enough to use anything but the local lingo. Compulsory attendance at school was introduced in 1882. Jules Ferry, the French Education Minister at the time considered Breton to be "a barbarous relic of another age."

The impact of compulsory schooling was not immediate since in Brittany children still left school at a pretty young age to work on farms or go off to sea. But long before this, teachers had a mission which they took very seriously. In 1845 teachers in Finistère, the western department of Brittany, were reminded by the sub-prefecture: "Above all gentlemen, remember that you have no higher purpose than to kill the Breton language."

Image No. 2: Breton is a hindrance to good citizenship

Not only was Breton considered a worthless language, it was also a hindrance to becoming a good citizen of France. It was the role of the teacher to turn children of France into good French citizens. That meant making them into French speakers. Non-French languages were seen as a threat to national unity. There's an often quoted line from 1927 by the Minister of National Education at that time that states: *"for the linguistic unity of France, the Breton language must disappear."*

Teachers used ridicule and humiliation and corporal punishment to convince little children that they should not use Breton at school or anywhere near the schoolyard. Breton parents who made the decision not to speak Breton to their children in the 50s and 60s often cited their memories of humiliation in school as one reason.

Image no. 3 – Breton is a language of the powerless

For men who spoke no, or very little, French, serving in the army was a rude awakening.

Military service for Breton speakers was a lesson in what it is like to be powerless to take charge of your own life. There are some famous stories (possibly true) of how Bretons were thought to be extremely brave because they would cry out what was heard as "à la guerre" (in French "to war") when in Breton they were pleading "d'ar ger" ("to home"). There's another story set in World War II where a soldier unable to speak French uses the word "Ya" ("yes" in Breton). This reinforces the idea that he must be speaking German and for his resistance he is executed. Breton really doesn't sound at all like German, but it is unintelligible to a French speaker.

The army definitely made an impact on Breton speakers. Both World War I and II presented a bigger world where to be modern was to speak French. Men brought not only this idea back home, but also changes in clothing, manners and music. They also remembered that French was the language of those in charge. Sociologist Fanch Elegoet found in his oral history work that the army experience totally reinforced Bretons' negative view of their own language. He quotes an 80-year old: *"If you cannot defend yourself in French, what can you do? You can only keep quiet and let others step all over you."*

Image No. 4 – To get ahead in the world, you must speak French

In the post war period Breton farmers were increasingly drawn into a wider market where French was spoken. It was no longer sufficient to travel to the local market. Exposure to a wider world was slowed by Brittany isolation by land travel. Railroads changed that, reaching the far west of Brittany in the 1860s and smaller rural outposts in the 1880s. While roads were poorly developed, the trains opened things up a great deal.

It is important to note that when it came to the sea, Bretons had long been world travelers as explorers and as fishermen, and as a strong element of the French Navy. Thus coastal towns were also places where French might be heard.

Getting ahead in the world meant learning French. The need to emigrate to larger cities or out of Brittany to find work or a better job required learning French ... but not necessarily abandoning Breton.

Image No. 5 – The "littleness" of Breton. Breton is not a true language

It is one thing to want to improve your life by learning another language, but it is quite another to reject the language you grew up with or that your parents and grandparents speak.

Media like books and newspapers, as well as schools and military service all brought Bretons in contact with a particular attitude about non-French languages in France. These media all gave you the message that Breton was a "patois." Indeed the word "baragouin" which is used in French to note a jumble of incorrect or incomprehensible language is rooted in the Breton words "bara" for bread and "gwin" (wine) or "gwenn" (white). French people of any social standing looked at the Breton language as baragouin. It was (and still is) very easy for Bretons to get the idea that Breton is a "little language" of the "past," not worth the effort of learning. In speaking of the teaching of regional languages in French schools, a Professor at the University of Paris III in 1975 questions *"... is it wise or opportune to urge little French children towards a bi- or trilingualism turned not toward the future of the planet, but towards the past of a little country?"*

Image No. 6 The grandeur of French

French has been promoted not only as the language of modernity and good citizenship for French patriots, but it alone can bring France world esteem and grandeur. French President Pompidou stated in 1972: *“There is no place for regional languages in a France destined to mark Europe with its seal.”*

French is the language of civilization itself. Here’s a wonderful quote from 1967 by Waldimir d’Ormesson, member of the Académie Française and President of the administrative council of the ORTF (Organisation for French Radio and Television).

“All Frenchmen are conscious of the importance of the language that is common to them. When they remember the role it has played for ten centuries in the slow formation of the nation, they feel a great respect for it. Secondly, French is not only our language: it was, it is, and it must remain one of the instruments of civilization. In this respect it represents an international public service.” (Haut comité pour la défense et l’expansion de la langue française 1967)

And it was this kind of thinking that the French took to every part of the world they colonized. In a 1969 article called “Francophonie: The French and Africa” Pierre Axedandre sums it all up as follows:

“Whether in Indochina or in North Africa or anywhere else, little was left for the local languages, which were expected to be eventually as thoroughly obliterated by French as Breton, Basque or Provençal. French was taught not so much as a more efficient instrument of modern, wide-ranging communication: it was taught as the key to a new way of life, or even as a way of life itself.” (Alexandre 1969)

Image No. 7 – Breton is not legal

Making French citizens of people living within its borders happened on a number of levels. Language change was also on the personal level of naming your children. A law in 1803 obliged parents to choose children’s’ names from one of several authorized calendars of names of Catholic saints, revolutionary heroes, or historic figures (real, not mythical) living before the Middle Ages. Thus it was illegal to name your child Gwendal, Soazig or Erwan. People of course continued to use non-official names for each other, but these were not your official name. As a French citizen you were Maurice; among your Breton friends and family you were Morvan. In 1966 the statutes were eased up a bit and in 1987 “local custom” was taken into consideration if your local civil servant was willing

to allow this. In 1993, parents were finally free to enter any name (within reason) on a birth certificate.

Breton names have become very popular – a mark of pride in identity, but also just a choice of a nice-sounding name.

So why hasn’t Breton been obliterated yet?

Bretons have fought for their language

There has long been a core of people in Brittany who have felt that Breton was a language worth defending.

In the 19th century it tended to be Romanticists, aristocrats, and clergy who collected oral traditions – songs and tales, and popular theater texts. Magazines were published in Breton and by the end of the century it was not just oral literature that was promoted but social and economic topics were also being presented in Breton.

While the 19th century collectors gave Breton an image of being a bit dusty and certainly ancient, it also brought prestige to Breton as a language capable of great literature.

In the 20th century the creation of a new literature was promoted – particularly through the organization called Gwalarn. The scholars and writers associated with this were out to prove that Breton was a modern language, with an international outlook, capable of standardization and the creation of new vocabulary.

The study of Breton and the creation of teaching materials and dictionaries has tended to be primarily outside of the university – amateur scholars studying the Breton of their own neighborhood or working more widely on the problem of creating a “national” language.

Bretons have sometimes been their own worst enemy. The promotion of Breton as a language for schools and literature has suffered from factions. There are four major dialects within Breton. Local pride and identities meant that Breton speakers often chose to not understand other dialects. However, when it came to making money in the marketplace, they had no problem communicating with Breton speakers using a different dialect. And onion sellers from northwestern Brittany crossed the channel and had no problem communicating as brothers with Welsh speakers.

The rift between dialect speakers has been enhanced in arguments over the formation of orthographies. How do you standardize Breton and still represent the specific nature of the dialects. Standardization has been bogged down particularly in personal factions – the

most important one still persistent from World War II based on the pitting of Breton nationalists against Resistance participants in WWII. I'll get to that a little later. Using a particular orthography has sent a strong political message at times.

Another problem area has been a rift between "native speakers" and what are called "Neo-bretonnants" – those learning it as a second language. It is felt by those who have had the good fortune to grow up speaking Breton that those learning it as a second language can never master Breton. Second language learners have been stereotyped as an urban elite with no interest in understanding the purer and more expressive Breton of rural Bretons – the true "people." It is felt by some that second language learners are doomed to speak a Breton that is highly influenced by French. There has been resistance on the part of native speakers to the creation of new vocabulary – viewed as "chemical" Breton. Sadly, those who do have a richer mastery of Breton have not always been in the forefront when it comes to teaching Breton or speaking up in its defense, and have preferred to spend time criticizing and belittling second language learners who have recognized that you can't always wait for perfect mastery to move forward.

Some of the factioning is rooted in Brittany's particular political history and this is very complicated. Understanding what happened during World War II in Brittany (and France more widely) is key to sorting out the factions in the Breton movement of today.

Those defending the Breton language in this period or promoting its acceptance into schools, etc. were of all political persuasions. But what is remembered are the Breton nationalists who chose to collaborate with Germany with the idea that Germany would grant Brittany independence. These Bretons felt that Brittany and the Breton language were clearly doomed under French rule. Germany looked like a hope for Bretons to gain control of their own destiny. Once Germans realized that the Breton nationalists seeking independence were a very small minority in Brittany, they quickly lost interest in the idea of granting these allies political power. But the public presence of the Breton language did make some significant gains during the war period with publications being supported, Breton language radio broadcasts implemented, and a Celtic Institute established. Thanks to a more extreme element – some 100 Bretons who took up arms with Germany to fight the French Resistance (which was stronger in Brittany than anywhere else in France with an estimated 30,000 participants), Breton nationalists and action for the Breton language and culture as a whole became labeled as "pro-Nazi" when the war ended.

The old wounds are still there. With German occupation of Brittany, the war was on the doorstep and neighbors were fighting neighbors. It was a horrible period for France and bitter memories remain.

But today this "Nazi" link is still used to discredit Breton militants. Long-dead Breton language activists cleared of collaboration charges after the war are still dragged up as examples of Breton Nazis when convenient. And today the word "terrorist" is also tagged on to political activists who want more autonomy for Brittany. And in the past year Bretons were outraged when cultural activists were hauled off in the wee hours of the morning for questioning and stigmatized for having terrorist associations.

The link of pro-Breton language activism with Nazis or terrorists continues to be cultivated by those who do not want the Breton language to survive

Is Breton doomed? – What is being done for it's future?

Breton in the Schools

You've heard of how the schools were used against Breton, but in more recent times, schools have been used to reintroduce Breton.

The first petition on the part of Bretons to get Breton into the schools dates to 1870 and petitions have continued since. But the presence of Breton in the schools is VERY recent.

The Loi Deixonne of 1951 finally allowed Breton into the schools – if a teacher was willing to volunteer to teach it for an hour a week. The Savary law of 1982 was the first real support for Breton in the schools – still as an optional subject taught 1 to 3 hours a week, usually outside of regular class time.

The limited time Breton was given in classes was clearly not going to help children master Breton – especially when the vast majority of their parents did not speak it at home. Based on the example of immersion schools elsewhere in Europe and in Canada (for French!), the Diwan schools were opened in 1977. These are schools where preschool children are immersed in Breton, and French is gradually introduced at the primary level. From one preschool in 1977 Diwan has grown to include some 2,700 children. The first of three middle schools opened in 1988 and a high school opened in 1994. The idea has always been that Diwan schools must be public schools open to all – tuition free – and Diwan has always worked to get this immersion style incorporated into the regular public school system.

While Diwan schools have a contract with the National Education system where some teacher salaries are paid by the state, budgets are always in crisis and parents invest heavily in fundraising. Educationally, the Diwan schools are highly successful. Children master Breton and their test scores for French and other subjects are as good, if not better, than scores for children in the public monolingual French schools.

Diwan's success has sparked an interest in bilingual programs in both the public and private Catholic schools of Brittany. The first public school bilingual program opened in 1982 and the first Catholic program started in 1990 and they have grown by 10-15% each year. But these are bilingual programs – half of the teaching is in Breton and half in French, and they do not give children the same ability as the Diwan schools do to use Breton as a language for all leisure time activity.

Today there are some 8,170 children in Diwan, public and Catholic schools. This is just 1% of the children of Brittany, but the success of these programs has been key in changing the image of Breton – it's now a language for youth.

Challenges in the schools.

While Breton is *allowed* in the schools, its growth is limited. Teacher training has always been a problem. The first university degree to certify Breton teachers was only established in 1985. The National Education system establishes the number of posts to be open for new teachers in any particular subject area, and those for Breton are not a large number. There is also the case of what appears to be plain ill-will on the part of the French education system. This past year a half dozen teachers qualified and interested in teaching Breton were named to teaching posts in the Paris area and even in Martinique and Guyana – French territories.

Breton is still mostly present in the schools as an extra-curricular activity. This year, with budget problems, high school classes are being cut back – the few that there are – and many students who want to take Breton as a foreign language option will need to commute 20-30 miles to the nearest high school which offers it.

To have your children take Breton in school, parents need to be militant about insisting that classes get established and they must remain militant so that classes are maintained from one year to the next.

Diwan's attempt to be recognized as a public school has been blocked by the high courts of France who hold up Article 2 of the French Constitution: "French is the language of the Republic." That means it must be used no less than half of the time as the language of

instruction or lunch/recess in public schools. The immersion method of teaching Breton has been branded as anti-constitutional, giving Diwan schools a radical image of being anti-French.

Breton for Adult Learners

The growth of Breton in the schools has inspired adults to take classes – evening or weekend classes now have some 8-9,000 adults enrolled.

For a long time, the only way to learn to read and write Breton was in catechism classes of the Church. But as the church abandoned Breton, and parents in the post war period discouraged their children from learning Breton, those who wanted to learn to read and write Breton had only a few tools to do this – one was the Skol Ober correspondence school founded in 1932. Other organizations like Skol an Emsav organized classes for adults in the 70s and 80s, and today classes are well-organized and widely available.

The Role of the Church

Brittany is a strongly Catholic area, and the Church has been mostly on the side of Breton. Indeed, many Bretons learned to read Breton through catechism classes and through the reading of tales of the saints (and there seem to be thousands of saints in Brittany). But the church has been somewhat opportunistic. When Breton has been the mainstream language of a community, Breton was used for catechism, hymns and sermons. When French began to be more widely used, Breton was abandoned. Individual priests have been strong supporters of Breton, doing scholarly studies, collecting oral literature, writing and promoting religious plays in Breton. But, depending on the period of history, Church support of Breton has also helped give an image of Breton as a conservative, anti-Republican language.

By the 1950s only exceptional services were given in Breton.

Media – A problem area, and an area of some promise

The growth of Breton language programs in the schools has stimulated a growth of Breton publications for children – books and magazines as well as games and pedagogical materials for school activities.

But because Breton has only been recently introduced to schools, most Breton speaking adults (an older population) cannot read or write Breton. The reading public is limited – estimated today to be perhaps 10,000 potential adult readers. That means that publishing is a labor of love – 1,000 to 2,000 copies of books are normally published. But as the number of adult learners continues to grow, the market for books and magazines will also grow. There is a diversity of reading materials being produced – news magazines and literary journals as well as literature of all kinds, including murder mysteries and comic books.

Financial support is always an issue for future growth. Rumor has it that grants are more available now for bilingual publications to the detriment of Breton only books.

Radio

During World War II a weekly and then daily 1-hour broadcast in Breton was produced, but this all ended at the end of the war. However, in 1946 airwaves opened to a half-hour program on Sundays. In 1964 daily 5-minute news bulletins were added. In 1982 people in western Brittany could get 5 hours a week of Breton language programming. In the 1980s and 90s the airwaves opened up so that a number of volunteer-run radio stations could be established which broadcast all or much of their daily programming in Breton. These have limited geographic range, but are being made available via computer internet.

Television

Public television in Brittany (which does not reach all of Brittany) has 5 minutes of news daily and one weekly 45-minute program in Breton.

Efforts to launch a cable channel, TV Breizh, in 2000 had lots of promise – 3 hours of Breton a day with a focus on Brittany in French programming also – but efforts to get public status have failed. Fees eliminated the growth of much of an audience in Brittany, so the Breton language content has been trimmed back for more generic programming.

Campaigns for a truly Breton television channel continue, however.

The internet

There is promise here and the Breton language is very much present on the internet – including online dictionaries, radio programming and Breton lessons. But how many people in Brittany have access to the internet? This is clearly a tool that can bring Breton to a world audience and can play a very important role in linking Bretons emigrants far from home. And this is a tool for youth.

Breton in public space

When traveling in Brittany, Breton language place names have always been noticeable, but many towns and even tiny villages have seen their names “Frenchified” and transformed into meaningless syllables. Seeing Breton on the street in larger cities is a new phenomenon but definitely a growth area with the establishment of Ofis ar Brezhoneg in 1999. They have launched a strong campaign to get businesses and organizations to use Breton in signage and encourage employees to learn and use it. Banks and commercial enterprises, for example, are using bilingual websites. People are finding that bilingualism is good for tourism – a big industry in Brittany.

There have been challenges in making Breton visible. Bilingual road signs were erected in the 1980s and 90s only only after years of campaigns by Breton militants. Petitions are never enough in Brittany, so those working to get bilingual signs in the 1970s eventually modified them themselves with sticky-backed letters. More radical action was taken with tar, and this seemed to force change as signs needed to be replaced and costs got higher. Progress is slow in some areas of Brittany and tarring of signs continues.

Attitude is everything ...

In stark contrast to indifference of the 1950s and 60s polls show that 90-95% of Bretons today want Breton to survive and are proud of their Breton identity.

Putting that into action is a bigger problem. Breton is no longer seen as a worthless language, but it is not seen by all in Brittany as a necessity.

While it is difficult to get Bretons to enroll in Breton classes on a massive scale, there has been a great deal of success in promoting a positive identity and the practice of unique Breton music and dance traditions.

Music has not completely escaped the negative social and political stigmatization attached to language. Many Bretons believed that to get ahead in the world it was not only necessary to speak French but to be French. The old songs were all right for old people, but not to be passed on to one's children. Fortunately many Bretons did not believe it was necessary to abandon their heritage to get ahead in a modern world. Others who had immigrated to Paris learned first-hand that "the French" were not necessarily a more civilized people. Emigrants returning to Brittany were frequently leaders in creating new contexts and institutions to foster Breton traditions. In the 1950s older performers were urged to dust off their repertoires, young Bretons learned traditional line and circle dances in "Celtic Circles" or joined a bagad – a newly invented version of a Scottish pipe band for Brittany. You joined for purely social reasons, but left with a new knowledge of Breton culture and history hidden from you in the schools.

In the 1960s Bretons were also inspired by the "roots" and folk revival movements going on in the U.S. and Britain, and older melodies and rhythms were being rearranged in groups that blended harps and bagpipes with electric guitars and keyboards. By the mid 70s and throughout the 80s Breton musicians were taking a closer look at traditions – collecting music directly from older masters and organizing local festivals to foster the unique traditions rooted in different areas of Brittany. This has fostered new generations of traditional singers and instrumentalists who strengthen an ongoing oral tradition by respecting the essentially social nature of learning music from older masters. While not replacing it, learning has been expanded beyond a face-to-face transmission to include use of recordings and written materials, and now the internet.

The creation of new sounds rooted in older melodies and rhythms continues, and Brittany has one of the healthiest music traditions of Europe. The transmission from one generation to the next has remained intact,

but has not prevented Bretons from creating new performance contexts or composing new music. Never have so many people in Brittany been engaged in performing Breton music or dancing Breton dances. Today there are an estimated 8,000+ amateur and professional performers of Breton music - not counting the learners and people who simply perform at home. This boils down to 1 of 500 Bretons taking an active role in passing along a unique heritage. And when a hip new band uses the Breton language for its songs, that inspires a few more young Bretons to learn this language.

Does the Breton language have a future??

On March 22, 2003, an estimated 15,000 people took to the streets of Rennes in the largest-ever demonstration for the Breton language. This was not only a confirmation of the support for the Breton language in Brittany, but a reaction of grave concern in view of the continued threats to this language on the part of the French government. A hastily organized demonstration on May 15, 2004, brought 6,000 Bretons into the streets of Nantes to express support for the cause of the Breton language as well as to demand that the department of Loire-Atlantique be reunified with the officially defined region of Brittany. Cut off from Brittany by the Vichy government in 1941 government efforts to convince Bretons that this department is a natural part of a region called "Pays de Loire" infuriates those living in this department who identify themselves as Bretons. In five surveys made of the population of Loire Atlantique between 62 and 75% have expressed the desire to have their department reattached to Brittany.

Bretons realize that demonstrations are not enough to save the Breton language or reunite Brittany, and have taken France to the European court for its language policies and practices. Time will tell if this has any positive impact.

The road blocks continue to be built by France – despite its efforts to present itself as the land of human rights. France has signed but not ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Just as Article 2 of the French Constitution ("French is the language of the Republic") blocks the expansion of Breton in the schools, and public support of Diwan immersion schools in particular, it also blocks the signing and enactment of international conventions on language rights in France. Despite growing interest on the part of families for Breton in the schools, cutbacks in teacher training continue and parents must work hard to open new classes for Breton. In comparison to the money invested in museums and cultural institutions of Paris, the resources available for the development of the Breton language and culture are pitiful.

In May 2003 French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin traveled to Quebec, Canada, and declared during his visit: "Cultural diversity is for us a political project. It is at the heart of our fight" [to combat globalization]. The Prime Minister praised Quebec on its success in protecting its values, language and culture during four centuries of Anglo-Saxon domination. Wouldn't it be nice if Mr. Raffarin was really talking about France when he talked about fighting for cultural diversity.

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OTHER RESOURCES

Ofis ar Brezhoneg

<http://www.ofis-bzh.org>

The Office of the Breton Language promotes public use of Breton in various ways.

Diwan Breizh

<http://www.diwanbreizh.org>

Immersion schools for the Breton language founded in 1977 which go from pre-school through high school, including some 2,700 students.

Div Yezh (the association of parents of children in the public schools)

e-mail: paul.molac@wanadoo.fr

The bilingual programs in public schools including some 3,000 students are enrolled in these programs from preschool through high school in all five departments of Brittany.

Dihun (association of parents of children in the Catholic schools)

<http://www.dihun.com>

The first bilingual programs in the Catholic schools started in 1990, and today there are close to 2,500 in these schools.

Unvaniezh ar Gelennerien Brezhoneg

<http://www.ugbrezhoneg.com>

The Union of Breton Teachers was founded in 1982 and includes some 200 teachers from Diwan as well as the bilingual public and Catholic school programs.

U.S. Branch of the International Committee for the Defense of the Breton Language (U.S. ICDBL)

<http://www.breizh.net/icdbl.htm>

Publishes a quarterly newsletter, Bro Nevez, with current information on the Breton language and culture. Website has good list of links to learn more.

Breton became a severely endangered language due to decades of suppression at the hands of the French educational system. Today, there are an estimated 500,000 speakers but this large number is deceptive in that most native speakers are above 60. Press (1986) estimated the number of active users at 50-100,000 over 25 years ago and this number has most likely diminished since. Celtic languages descended from a common ancestral language called Proto-Celtic, a member of the Indo-European language family. Reconstruction of Proto-Celtic shows that it was a conservative language that had retained many features of Proto-Indo-European, the hypothetical ancestor of all Indo-European languages. Although the original homeland of the Celts cannot be determined with absolute accuracy, it is generally believed that they appeared in the eastern part of central Europe around the 5th century BC and subsequently spread throughout most of the European continent, reaching the Black Sea.

How to learn Breton by yourself? Start with an easy and free online course! We have adopted an objective and efficient approach to learn how to speak a language easily and quickly: we suggest you to start by memorizing words, phrases and practical expressions that you can use in everyday life and that will be useful when traveling. Specialties such as galettes, kir breton or Muscadet wines are appreciated across the whole of Europe, indeed across the whole world. While passing through the region, you can also enjoy kouigns, a typical sweet bread. Spoken in Brittany by about 170 thousand people, Breton is a regional minority language of France considered endangered by UNESCO. How to succeed in having good pronunciation within a week to a month?