The interaction of gender and mutation in Breton:
a cross-generational perspective

This paper uses fieldwork data from a range of speakers to examine grammatical gender and initial consonant mutation (ICM) in Breton. Breton nouns may have masculine or feminine gender, which is marked by agreement with pronouns and the cardinal numerals 2, 3 and 4, and by patterns of initial consonant mutation. For example, feminine singular nouns undergo lenition following the definite article, but masculine nouns do not: feminine *taol* 'table' becomes *an daol* 'the table', but masculine *ti* 'house' is simply *an ti* 'the house'. The numerals also trigger mutations of their own on the following noun: *daou di* 'two houses'; *div daol* 'two tables'.

The gender of Breton nouns is not generally reflected in their phonology or morphology, as it is in some languages (Corbett, 1991), although some suffixes tend to result in a noun being masculine or feminine – for example, the singulative *-enn* always makes the noun feminine (Irslinger, 2014). Like in Welsh, the Breton gender system can be considered **opaque**. This is first because not all nouns mutate: there are a number of exceptions to the mutation rules, and in addition to this, not all initial consonants undergo mutation. Secondly, there is no one-to-one relationship between mutation and gender: feminine singular nouns undergo lenition following the article, but so do masculine plural nouns referring to humans, such as *pesketerien* 'fishermen' > *ar besketerien* 'the fishermen'. Lenition is thus marking both masculine and feminine, and singular and plural nouns. Studies of Welsh have shown that this system is difficult for children to acquire, and they have not reached adult proficiency even by the age of 11 (Gathercole et al., 2001; Thomas & Gathercole, 2007; Thomas & Mayr, 2010).

The system of gender and mutation in Breton is particularly interesting in light of language revitalisation movements and the growing number of younger speakers whose parents may not speak Breton, and whose only input is Breton-medium education. The Breton context therefore differs somewhat from that in Wales, where a greater number of young Welsh speakers come from Welsh-speaking homes. Various claims have been made about the 'Neo-Breton' variety used by younger Breton speakers, including that they omit or are confused about the system of initial consonant mutation (Hornsby, 2005). In light of the fact that many younger speakers come from French-speaking homes, it would not be surprising to find some degree of influence from French. Equally, older speakers who now have few opportunities to speak Breton may show attrition effects (Dressler, 1991).

To investigate these issues, three groups of Breton speakers were interviewed: (i) 9 older adult speakers aged 58-83 who grew up speaking Breton (mean age = 72.3); (ii) 7 younger adult speakers aged 24-52 who learnt Breton largely through education (mean age = 38); (iii) 12 teenagers aged 15-17 (mean age = 16.1) who are currently educated through the medium of Breton.

Speakers were asked to produce Breton words in response to pictures, and three contexts were examined: first, a singular noun preceded by the definite article; secondly, the noun preceded by the numeral 2 (*daou/div*); and thirdly, the plural. For example, for 'boat', speakers were asked to produce 'the boat', 'two boats' and '(many) boats'. A separate picture was provided for each context, and 18 distinct nouns were elicited. The goal was to examine whether speakers used the expected patterns of gender and mutation: agreement in the numeral, lenition of feminine nouns following the definite article, and lenition of all nouns following the numeral. It also permitted a

comparison of distinctive mutation, where the mutation is subject to grammatical constraints and conveys information, and contact lenition, which affects all items regardless of their grammatical features (Press, 1986). Finally, including the plural allowed the elicitation of the unmutated form as a control.

The findings from the fieldwork indicate that most speakers have a strong grasp of the mutation system, and this is particularly true of both groups of adult speakers, who use the expected mutation in at least 85 per cent of contexts. This applies to both lenition of feminine nouns and lenition following *daou/div*. The teenage speakers lag a little further behind, and are more likely to omit the mutation than the adults. There is also a lot of interspeaker variation: while some teenagers use mutation and gender with adult-like proficiency, others seem to struggle: a few speakers, for example, use only one form of the numeral, regardless of the gender of the noun. This suggests that some younger speakers may be confused about gender in Breton, and this consequently impacts upon their use of initial consonant mutation – speakers are unlikely to use the expected mutations if they are unsure of the gender of the nouns in question.

It is interesting to note speakers' own feelings about gender and mutation in Breton. Several speakers reported that they found gender 'difficult', and were unsure of the gender of certain nouns, particularly less frequently-used nouns, such as *gozh* 'mole'. Even older speakers made contradictory claims about the gender of nouns – stating for example, that a noun was masculine, but then using the feminine patterns of agreement. This is unsurprising, given the high degree of dialectal variation in traditional Breton, and the lack of opportunities speakers may have to use Breton frequently. It also makes the system more challenging for younger speakers to acquire.

In sum, speakers of all ages are more proficient at using the Breton gender and mutation system than some accounts would suggest. Some teenage speakers struggle with the gender of certain nouns, or with the system in general, which in turn affects their use of mutation. However, there is little to suggest that younger speakers as a whole are confused about initial consonant mutation, or that they omit with any frequency.

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