

MULTILINGUALISM:

Empowering
Individuals

Transforming
Societies

MULTILINGUALISM: EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS, TRANSFORMING SOCIETIES

New speakers of Breton: Beyond stereotypes, towards new understanding and new spaces

Merryn Davies-Deacon • Queen's University, Belfast
m.davies-deacon@qub.ac.uk



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The MEITS project (2016–2020)

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- Part of a collaborative project across 4 universities in the UK, involving 34 researchers
- Broad aim of demonstrating the value of languages in the UK, from multiple perspectives
- My research: PhD (2016–2020); now adapting into a monograph (2024??)

New speakers

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- “This type of speaker has not been referenced in the literature yet, but they are becoming central to language revitalisation” (Grinevald and Bert 2011:51)
- “At its most basic level, the designation ‘new speaker’ refers to social actors who use and claim ownership of a language that is not, for whatever reason, typically perceived as belonging to them, or to ‘people like them’.” (Ó Murchadha et al. 2018:4)
- Different linguistic contexts: *neofalantes* (Galician), *euskaldunberri* (Basque), “Dublin Irish”, *néo-bretonnants* ...

“Néo-bretonnants”

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- “a new generation of Breton speakers, who represent a radical shift in stance ... and who, in many ways, stand apart from the traditional speakers of the language” (Jones 1995:428)
- “the language reformers – both earlier and today – are urban and intellectual. They draw on aspects of culture familiar to them in renovating Breton, aspects which do not resonate with traditional speakers” (Timm 2001:454)
- “younger, urbanized standard speakers often have little in common with older, less formally-educated rural native speakers” (German 2007:153)

| “Néo-bretonnants” | Traditional speakers |
|--|---|
| Younger, middle-class, mobile, well-educated | Older, working-class, usually farmers |
| Located in larger towns and cities | Located in rural hamlets |
| Live all over Brittany | Restricted to western Brittany |
| Acquire Breton as a second language | Acquire Breton through intergenerational transmission |
| Acquire Breton in formal education | |
| Use Breton as much as possible | Restrict use of Breton to intimate settings |
| Militant promotion of Breton | Speak Breton only because of linguistic ability |
| Literate in Breton | Unable to read and write Breton |
| Proud of Breton identity | No strong sense of Breton identity |
| Use standard Breton | Use dialectal Breton |
| French-influenced linguistic structure | Linguistic structure not influenced by French |
| Celtic-derived lexicon | French-influenced lexicon |

(See e.g. Jones 1995; Timm 2001; Hornsby 2005; German 2007)

Probing the category

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- Some new speakers deliberately aim to speak more traditional varieties of Breton (“native authenticists”, Hornsby and Quentel 2013)
- Certain dictionaries prioritise the lexicon of traditional speakers (Rottet 2014)
- Schools (German 2007) and courses for adult learners (Adkins 2014) teach localised varieties
- Traditional speaker activists are not unknown (Ó hIfearnáin 2013)
- Children who acquire Breton at school gain a sophisticated understanding of syntax (Kennard 2014)

Mixed-methods research

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- “An increasingly wide body of literature has examined the ideological practices surrounding new speakers, and attitudes to their varieties ... Less studied, however, are the linguistic forms used by new speakers.” (Nance 2018:213)
- Combining micro- and macro-linguistic categories (Atkinson 2018) to reveal the nuances of new speaker identity and language; also “total linguistic fact” (Silverstein 1985)

My research

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- Linguistic data (quantitative and qualitative)
 - Focused on lexicon
 - Media contexts: magazines/newspapers, radio broadcasts, social media (Facebook group posts)
- Interview data
 - Nine participants, working in Breton-language media/language planning
 - Semi-structured interview, questions on acquisition and use

Findings from the corpus

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- Register variation according to medium and context
- Distinct differences between print publications
 - *Bremañ*: more typical “néo-breton”, fewer borrowings
 - *Brud Nevez*: more borrowings, some metalinguistic discourse
 - *Ya!*: a newer form of “néo-breton” with more international borrowings
- “Néo-breton” is not the same as standard Breton

New media

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- The most “néo-breton” of the three contexts, but also the least standard
- Inclusive of learners and of the use of French despite advertising itself as a Breton-only space
- Playful use of language: metalinguistic discourse, ludic orthography and script use, references to multiple other languages
 - Performativity, demonstration of high linguistic competence
- Use of well-known dialect features to establish identity

Findings from the interviews

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- Variety of routes to Breton acquisition
 - *Stummadurioù hir* – 3 interviewees (a typical new speaker pathway: *muda*, Pujolar and Puigdevall 2015)
 - Self-study followed by evening classes – 1 interviewee (new speaker)
 - Acquisition at school – 1 interviewee (new speaker? But one Breton-speaking parent)
 - Acquisition within the family and community – 2 (older) interviewees (traditional speakers?)
 - Acquisition within the family and at school – 1 interviewee (traditional speaker?? Aged under 40)
 - Acquisition within the family (from new speaker parent) and at school – 1 interviewee (neo-native speaker)

Measuring speaker identity

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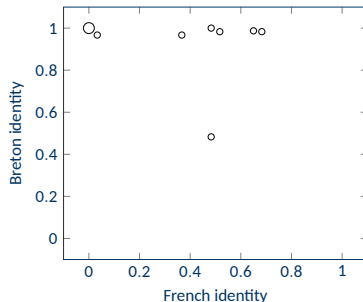
Use of a continuous scale (Carruthers and Fisher 2020)

Pas du tout
breton.ne

Entièrement
breton.ne

Pas du tout
français.e

Entièrement
français.e



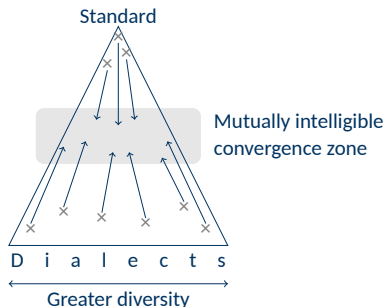
Findings from the interviews

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- Both interviewees in Haute-Bretagne had close familial connections to Basse-Bretagne
- Interviewees spoke about shifts in their dialect over time



Who is a new speaker?

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- Difficult to define, different methods of acquisition
 - Nonetheless, some shared tendencies among non-traditional speakers
- Role of neo-native speakers (see Ó Giollagáin 2004:74 for Irish; Sayers 2012:101 for Cornish)
- “new speakers should be taken seriously as a folk category in speakers’ negotiations of language, identity, capital and belonging, but not used as an analytical category for delineating the object of study or its features” (O’Rourke and Pujolar 2019:18)

What do (new) speakers do?

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- Crucial role of identity: strong beliefs about language
 - But these may not be aligned with mainstream/pro-standard ideologies
- Inclusion of learners and of speakers of other varieties
- ... but at the same time, expression of personal identity (especially online) through use of dialectal features; idiosyncratic language use
- Overall: speakers negotiate a balance of identity and communication
 - Anonymity versus authenticity (Woolard 1992)

What can we take forward?

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- Areas for further research:
 - More linguistic data and continued mixed-methods approaches
 - Specificities of the online context
 - Role of neo-native speakers
- Dangers of stereotyping
 - Who does it serve? What community are we supporting?

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