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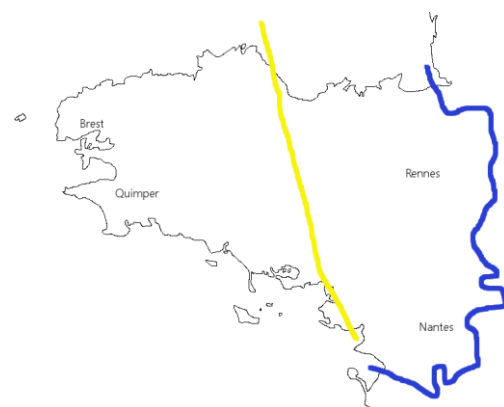
## **1. Title.**

# Facebook as a potential site for non-standard Breton

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## **2. Breton.**



Breton is a Celtic language spoken in the region of Brittany in north-west France; there are estimated to be around 200,000 speakers (Broudic, 2013:10). Traditionally, these speakers have been restricted to western Brittany, in the area to the west of the yellow line on this map. However, as a sense of Breton regional identity has become particularly strong over the last century or so, the language has become a symbol of the region, and is consequently associated with Brittany in its entirety. The blue line marks the border of the historical and cultural region of Brittany,

showing the territory on which Breton is promoted.

In common with many minority languages, Breton suffered as a result of industrialisation and the development of a strong central state in the early modern period, and saw a decline in its speaker numbers which became particularly severe after the first world war. At the same time, however, a revitalisation movement was gaining traction, which engendered significant quantities of Breton speakers who had not learnt the language in the home, but instead taken a conscious decision to acquire it as adults. While a declining proportion of the population continued to transmit Breton intergenerationally, a growing second group took it up despite not being brought up in Breton-speaking families. This situation persists today, and this second group has become known in academic discourse as *new speakers*, in contrast with *traditional speakers*.

The language of new speakers of Breton, sometimes referred to as 'néo-Breton', tends to be characterised in certain ways: it is said to be phonologically and grammatically closer to French, or sometimes to be hypercorrected in terms of its syntax so as to appear less similar to French; it has also been claimed to be less influenced by French in terms of its lexicon, having been deliberately 'purified' to replace lexemes borrowed from French by neologisms built on a Celtic model. Additionally, while traditional Breton varies significantly, and is typically invoked with reference to four distinct dialects, 'néo-Breton' is perceived as highly standardised and codified. New speakers are therefore associated with the use of a more standard language variety.

## **3. New versus traditional speakers.**

As well as these linguistic aspects of new and traditional speaker varieties, various non-linguistic attributes are typically assigned to the two types of speaker, as summarised in the following table:

New speakers	Traditional speakers
Younger, middle-class, mobile, and 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
Literate in Breton	Unable to read and write in Breton
Militant promotion of Breton	Speak Breton only because of linguistic ability
Proud of Breton identity	No strong sense of Breton identity

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

Because new speakers are classified as more motivated to use Breton and willing to use it in wider contexts than just the home and local community, while traditional speakers supposedly restrict their use of the language to these settings, researchers have predicted that only the variety of language used by new speakers will persist into the future; consequently that only a standardised, non-dialectal ‘néo-Breton’ will survive. My research investigates this claim with reference to linguistic data.

#### **4. Aims of the present research.**

Going by the characteristics assigned to new speakers and their language, language in the media ought to be overwhelmingly produced by new speakers. If traditional speakers restrict their use of the language to the home and local community, it follows that the language found in the media, which is produced for public platforms and accessed from across substantial geographical distances, does not come from this type of speaker. Equally, traditional speakers’ supposed ‘illiteracy’ in Breton precludes them from engaging with both print journalism and social media, and their access to the latter is also restricted by their supposed greater age and lack of mobility.

Examining the type of Breton found in the media can therefore test whether claims made about new speakers and their language are valid. If there is a significant presence of non-standard Breton in media domains, two possibilities must be considered. Firstly, traditional speakers may be more active in the production of Breton-language media than is thought; in which case, the attributes assigned to them in academic discourse are unwarranted, and it is less likely that traditional dialectal Breton is moribund. The second possibility is that new speakers are consciously choosing to use aspects of language that deviate from the prescribed standard, which casts doubt on the assertion that they use a homogeneous ‘néo-Breton’ variety.

In order to test whether these claims can be made, my research examines the use of Breton in three domains within the media: print journalism, radio programmes, and online social media. This paper looks at data from the third of these categories, focusing on the orthography and lexicon and presenting preliminary findings from my PhD research.

### 5. Facebook e brezhoneg.

The social media data under examination are taken from *Facebook e brezhoneg*<sup>1</sup> ('Facebook in Breton'), the largest Facebook group for Breton speakers, which currently has over 10,000 members. Many of these members are not active participants in the group, however; those posting regularly number only several hundred. The group was originally set up to campaign to allow translation of the Facebook interface into Breton, but this was achieved in late 2014, allowing the group to become a more general space for exchanges in and about the language. As an 'open group', it allows anyone logged into Facebook to read and search its posts.

*Facebook e brezhoneg* provides a specific and unusual type of bilingual context. Competence in French is expected from its members, who, as Breton speakers, are mostly resident in Brittany and thus must use French in their everyday life. New speakers of Breton, of course, tend to have French as a native language. However, the use of French in the group is discouraged: the image displayed at the top of the group's page contains the instruction "Kasit **ho kemenadennoù e brezhoneg** mar plij [h]a chomit dereat ha doujus", and immediately below, its French equivalent: "Merci de **rédiger vos messages en breton** et de rester courtois et respectueux" ("Please write your messages in Breton and remain polite and respectful"; emphasis in original). Despite this instruction not to write in French, many of the posts in the group do use French, and this rarely attracts comment or criticism.

### 6. Overview of posts.

Examining the posts in *Facebook e brezhoneg* reveals certain recurrent subject matters. The Breton language itself is unsurprisingly among the most frequent: many posts are requests for translations of phrases into Breton or from Breton to French, or queries about attestations of specific vocabulary. Politics is also a frequent topic, often generating large volumes of discussion: many users have strongly pro-Breton, often anti-French, political views. The frequency of political discussion and the views expressed again links the group to stereotypical attributes of new speakers, in that users display their strong sense of Breton identity, thought to be less salient for traditional speakers. A third frequent category is advertisements for Breton-related events: language courses, conversation sessions, lectures, and so on. This category generates little discussion, however.

The posts in the group display a high level of linguistic self-awareness through frequent translanguaging, i.e. drawing on linguistic resources from multiple languages. As well as Breton and French, which often occur in the same post, sometimes as direct translations but often for different parts of a post, other languages and elements of other languages can be identified. English is not infrequently seen—one extensive conversation in the sample under examination occurs in English, between two participants who are clearly not native speakers of the language. In reference to the infamous debate around orthographies

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/334727793245979/>

in revitalised Breton (see Wmffre, 2008), other writing systems are also found: at one point, a Breton word is rendered in Cyrillic; at another, in Japanese katakana.

To build the corpus for this study, I developed certain rules for taking a sample of posts. Posts where the original stimulus for conversation was on a linguistic subject matter were excluded, to avoid the possible over-representation of lexical tokens that would not otherwise be used by the writer of the post; however, it was impossible to ignore all posts where the ensuing conversation turned to linguistic topics, as this was so frequent. For practical reasons, all posts sampled began with a textual stimulus for conversation rather than a picture or a link to a different web page. Additionally, the post had to be at least 50% in Breton. The 50% threshold allowed for posts where a Breton opening message was paired with its French translation, which was not infrequent in the sample. Posts were also excluded if there was no top-level response from a different user in Breton, ensuring that all language sampled was accepted as valid Breton by its audience.

Using these criteria, a corpus was created with a total of just under 12,000 words in Breton or as part of Breton-language interactions. 99 users are represented in the sample, contributing varying quantities of discourse.

## **7. Orthographic variation.**

Against a backdrop of much work on creating unified orthographies of Breton during the twentieth century, which often caused acrimonious debates, no orthography was ever officially adopted for Breton, but a de facto standard has emerged in the *peurunvan* developed in the 1940s. This orthography is used in the majority of publications, as well as by the Breton language office, which ensures its use on public signage and in official documents. While *peurunvan* is the most commonly seen orthography in the public space, and accordingly is the most frequently found in *Facebook e brezhoneg*, the other unified orthographies developed in the twentieth century<sup>2</sup> are also seen on the group, albeit infrequently.

Another aspect of orthographic variation in the group is the use of dialectal orthographies. The Vannetais dialect, being linguistically distinct from the other three, saw the development of an orthography during the early modern period which now tends to be absent from publications, but it is found occasionally in *Facebook e brezhoneg*. Other idiosyncratic orthographic systems found draw on features of the dialects without being equivalent to full dialectal orthographies: one user uses the spellings *berman* and *berton* (standard *bremañ* and *breton*) to mark a metathesis found in Vannetais, while another uses *brezouneg* (standard *brezhoneg*) to indicate a feature of the Léonard dialect.

Other features also attest a flexible approach to orthography. Words from other languages are frequently respelt to fit Breton conventions, even in the case of proper names. The game *Scrabble*, spelt in that way by one user, is adapted as *Skrabell* by two other users. Additionally, the use of colloquial language is indicated by expressing abbreviations orthographically: instead of the phrase *deuz ar henta* (*peurunvan*: *deus ar c'hentañ*), a user writes *'z ar henta*.

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<sup>2</sup> These being *orthographe universitaire/skolveurieg* (1950s) and *orthographe interdialectale/etrerannyezhele* (1970s); both, as well as *peurunvan*, have a variety of alternative names.

## 8. The lexicon of Breton.

Lexicon is frequently identified in academic work as a prominent distinction between the language of new and traditional speakers. The following table, adapted from Timm (2001:456), shows that ‘néo-Breton’ is perceived as having a tendency to replace lexemes derived from French, as used in traditional Breton, with new coinages on the basis of existing Breton words or other Celtic sources, or to extend the use of ‘native’ Breton lexemes at the expense of French-derived ones. *Baleadenn*, below, is coined on the word *bale* ‘to walk’ plus a nominalising suffix. *Baraerezh* comes from *baraer* ‘baker’ plus a nominalising suffix indicating a place. *Abeg* is attested in traditional Breton, but dictionaries from the early twentieth century show that it had become restricted to the highest literary registers.

	<b>TB</b>	<b>NB</b>	<b>French</b>
‘walk’	pourmenadenn	baleadenn	<i>promenade</i>
‘reason’	rezen	abeg	<i>raison</i>
‘bakery’	boulangerezh	baraerezh	<i>boulangerie</i>

For the past twenty years or so, the lexicon of Breton has been prescribed by the *Office public de la langue bretonne*, the official body in charge of language planning for Breton, which is financed by regional and local government. In this function the *Office* supersedes a number of other structures created over the course of the twentieth century for the purpose of codifying the Breton lexicon. Like stereotypical ‘néo-Breton’, and like early figures in the Breton revitalisation movement, the *Office* tends to recommend words of Celtic origin; however, it is not as strict about this as other bodies have been on the past, and some of its recommendations are derived from French.

## 9. Lexical variation on Facebook.

*Facebook e brezhoneg* displays a large number of words that deviate from the *Office*’s recommendations: much of this involves the use of terms borrowed from French, adapted to Breton orthography and inflectional morphology, as in the table below:

	<b>Attested</b>	<b>Advised</b>	<b>French</b>
‘cable-car’	teleferik	fungarr	<i>téléphérique</i>
‘sexist’	seksist	revelour	<i>sexiste</i>
‘reptiles’	reptilianed	stlejviled	<i>reptiles</i>
‘flag’	drapo	banniel	<i>drapeau</i>

*Drapo* is a particularly interesting case, *banniel* being itself a borrowing from Old French, its French origin presumably evident to speakers in the existence of the French cognate *bannière*.

Borrowings from languages other than French, mostly English, are also found, among them *TV* (an abbreviation that tends not to be used in French, *télé* being used instead) and *organek* (French *bio*). This second example is again interesting, as a user comments on the use of *organek* with a reference to English: the first user responds with a list of languages other than English that use some form of the word *organic*, including Spanish, Catalan, and Turkish.

These deviations from the recommended lexicon are not restricted to single occurrences. The term *goulenn groñs* ('petition'; defined by a 1994 dictionary<sup>3</sup> as a verb meaning 'to demand', and with a rough literal meaning of 'ask firmly') is used by multiple users across multiple posts, although the *Office* recommends *goulennadeg*. The close association of Breton language communities with political activism perhaps suggests that this is a particularly necessary word, which has had the opportunity to spread easily through the relevant networks without recourse to official channels.

Dialectal variation is also found in the lexicon, although interestingly this appears to be mostly restricted to prepositions. The Vannetais prepositions *àr* 'on' and *get* 'with' are often found rather than their standard counterparts *war* and *gant*. Using this small but frequently occurring set of dialectal markers perhaps ensures that the user's use of Vannetais comes across without requiring readers of the post, or indeed the user themselves, to have a developed knowledge of the Vannetais lexicon. The user can assert their alignment with Vannetais identity without compromising on the communicative function of their post, and non-users of Vannetais are able to respond. The small number of posts written completely in Vannetais, using the traditional Vannetais orthography and lexemes, by contrast, attract only Vannetais replies. This provides some evidence against the claim that dialectal diversity in Breton is disappearing, although perhaps implies that the form in which it is expressed is changing.

## **10. Some more examples.**

Thorough and systematic examination of the data has been impossible at this preliminary stage. Instead, I have looked in a little more detail at four media-related words, all of which, as twentieth-century inventions, have provoked a choice between adopting the French term or coining a Celtic one. Additionally, the word for 'thank you' was examined, the division between *mersi* and *trugarez* being a high-profile example of the perceived difference between new and traditional speaker varieties invoked in academic discourse. Stereotypical 'néo-Breton', we are informed, should use the Celtic-derived lexemes in all cases; the *Office* recommends it in all five of these cases except for *radio*, although *skingomz* is advised in certain multi-word phrases.

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<sup>3</sup> Kadored, Desbordes, and Kervella, 1994:90.

	< French/ International	# Tokens	# Speakers	< Celtic	# Tokens	# Speakers
‘radio’	radio	4	3	skingomz	0	0
‘telephone’	telefon	0	0	pellgomz	5	3
‘internet’	internet	9	8	kenrouedad	2	2
‘television’	tele/TV	1	1	skinwel	1	1
‘thank you’	mersi	6	4	trugarez	6	6

The data reveal no overall polarisation in one direction or the other as regards the use of French- or Celtic-derived lexemes, although *radio* and *pellgomz* seem to win out over the alternatives, in accordance with the *Office*’s recommendations. *Internet* enjoys a fairly substantial level of popularity over *kenrouedad*, however, in defiance of the *Office*, and *tele/TV/skinwel* and *mersi/trugarez* are less conclusive, showing the persistence of variation. For all five items, all speakers are consistent in their own usage; none appears in both categories for a single word, but some use Celtic words in some cases and French in others, e.g. both *internet* and *trugarez*.

## **11. Preliminary conclusions.**

The results of this preliminary investigation indicate that despite the claim that new speakers use a highly standardised form of Breton, the language used on Facebook shows that speakers are in fact not homogeneous in their lexicon or orthography (despite claims). Words derived from Celtic and French coexist, and dialectal words and orthographies continue to be used to a certain degree. Words borrowed from other languages, usually French but often English, can be accepted in Breton through respelling, rather than requiring the coinage of a Celtic-based synonym. In the bilingual context of the Facebook group, this ensures such words can be understood while still fitting them into an acceptable paradigm of Breton discourse.

With access to a large body of data from ordinary speakers rather than employees of the *Office public de la langue bretonne* and other official bodies, social media provide the potential for corpus planning to become a bottom-up process, allowing language planners to examine the actual usages of speakers rather than having to coin lexemes in cases where the wider community may have already developed a way of expressing a concept. Instead of relying on a language academy or similar structure, the language can be encouraged to develop at a more grassroots level, ensuring ordinary speakers feel engaged with the language planning process.

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