

## *The nativeness of Breton speakers and their invisibilisation*

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**Abstract:** I discuss the nativeness of heritage speakers of Breton in the twentieth century. I present a syntactic test designed for Breton that sets apart the natives and the late learners, for which Breton is a second language. Nativeness is revealed by a better tolerance to syntactic overload when sufficient linguistic stress is applied. Both heritage speakers of inherited Breton and early bilinguals whose linguistic input comes exclusively from school answer this test alike, which I take as a sign they are cognitively natives. The syntactic nativeness of children deprived of familial Breton input suggests there is much more young Breton natives among contemporary speakers than previously assumed. Taking stock of these results, I discuss the cultural invisibilisation of Breton native speakers. I compare their cultural treatment with the figure of the ghost.

**Keywords:** nativeness, new speaker, Breton, heritage language

The article has two main sections. In the first section, I discuss the question of nativeness in Breton, a Celtic heritage language spoken in Brittany. I present what constitutes nativeness for formal and cognitive linguistics, and what parameters impact nativeness. Following Schutter (2013), I show how nativeness may be revealed by tests that engineer linguistic stress. I report on a pilot study designed for Breton, and conclude for the nativeness of different profiles of speakers. In the second section, I present some aspects of the cultural invisibilisation of these Breton natives, in public or academic discourse. I present concrete examples of social interactions that fall under the generalisation that the culture treats them as symbolic ghosts: associated with the past, either invisible or posing an existential threat.

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<sup>1</sup> The syntactic tests in this paper have been elicited by the author with Breton adult speakers in their twenties to fifties. The raw data can be found on line, on the *Elicitation Center* of ARBRES, the Breton wikigrammar <http://arbres.iker.cnrs.fr>. Each elicitation is given a reference between brackets [name (date of elicitation)] and corresponds to a page of transcript of the results of the elicitation. Speakers are identified by either their full name, an acronym or a pseudonym, depending on their personal choice on the matter. I am glad to thank them here for their trust and enthusiasm, as well the two anonymous reviewers that provided their comments.

## 1. **Native heritage speakers vs. L2 speakers**

In this section, I first inventory the parameters between natives and late learners of a language. I show that the notions of *home language* and *inherited variety* more accurately boil down to parameters like (i) critical age of exposure and (ii) consistency of the input. I discuss these parameters for the Breton situation, and show how they design different profiles of natives.

### 1.1. **Young natives with familial transmission**

Both sociologic and linguistic approaches consider that children that have received consistent parental linguistic input at home since birth are natives of that language. Young adults who were raised in Breton by at least one of their parents unambiguously qualify as natives. Such speakers exist in Breton. They are estimated 9% of the Breton speakers under 40 years old in Karaez in the report from the *Public Office Of Breton* OPAB (2014), and even 10% of all Breton speakers in the *Regions Institute survey* TMO (2018<sup>2</sup>). OPAB (2014) also finds an extra 8% of the speakers who declare they acquired Breton from their grandparents. OPAB (2014) considers that familial transmission was at its lowest in the 80s and 90s, but that it is not decreasing anymore: in Karaez at least, the younger the Breton-speaking parents are, the more they speak Breton with their children.<sup>3</sup>

Jouitteau (2018) has studied in detail the syntactic dialectal flexibility of such a speaker of inherited Breton who had also received Breton schooling in the immersion school Diwan ([Brendan Corre (12/2017)]). The speaker has received Breton input at home from his mother and maternal grandparents, all native speakers from Treger. As a working young adult, he reports no interruption of practice, with various Breton linguistic contacts in everyday life in the countryside. Much like a prototypical speaker of a traditional dialect, he produces syntactic forms that are specific to his Southern Treger dialect (Prat). He understands Standard Breton forms and structures, but considers them incorrect in his own Breton. He recognizes none of the forms typical of other traditional dialects. Jouitteau (2018) thus concludes that his productions are typical of a traditional speaker, with no greater dialectal flexibility

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<sup>2</sup> Note that at the moment of writing this study, only the main results of TMO (2018) have been announced to the press. The text of the work has not been published yet, and its methodology is yet unknown. 10% was also the maximal estimation of Davalan (1999:99).

<sup>3</sup> There is a possibility that part of the parents interviewed for OPAB (2014) are not Breton natives themselves. It is certainly a factor of change for the language, with possible influences of French-like structures, or of Standard Breton on the local variety. This impacts the transmitted language, but this does not impact the nativeness of this variety for their children. Even children in contact with drastically syntactically impoverished structures like pidgins end up speaking syntactically complex languages like creoles. Likewise, deaf children, if not isolated from each other, create among themselves syntactically complex sign languages (Goldin-Meadow 2003). Complex grammar systems are not invented by adults and later taught to children; it is what grows in children and persists in them as adults in normal conditions.

than a speaker two generations older, if not for his passive good understanding of Standard Breton due to schooling.

The syntactic portrait of young traditional speakers is of particular interest when reflecting on the potential differences between old natives of the Breton language and young generations schooled in Breton. Dołowy-Rybińska (2017) has interviewed a sixteen years old Diwan pupil who expresses herself about the contrast between her own situation, without Breton speakers at home, and that of her schoolmates who do have Breton-speaking families. This is of importance because first, existence of inherited Breton speakers among contemporary teenagers is obvious to her, and second, she testifies that she is herself in daily linguistic contact with native speakers of inherited Breton of her own age. Recall here that *Diwan*, for most pupils, is a boarding school. From secondary school (*skolaj*) to high school (*lise*), which is from 11 to 18 years old, geographical distance with the families implies full time contact between teenagers during the school week. This is particularly clear for high school, as there still exists only one in the entire country. The common misrepresentation that children schooled in Diwan never speak with natives is thus an impossible scenario. Young natives with traditional transmission of the language are schooled among a majority of children for whom Breton is not spoken at home. At an age where linguistic group norms are of importance, we should expect high sociolinguistic cross-influences between these two groups.

Assessment of nativeness for children who received early consistent Breton input, but exclusively outside of home since the age of first schooling asks for different factors to be considered, like the age of first exposure and the consistency of the input they receive.

## **1.2. Critical age of exposure**

Early cognitive studies have postulated the existence of a critical stage for the acquisition of syntax. It means that a child can no longer attain native-like proficiency in a language after a certain age of exposure (Penfield & Roberts 1959, Lenneberg 1967). Different lines of evidence support this hypothesis for syntax. I will briefly present here some arguments from different empirical domains, ranging from linguistic input impoverishments, cognitive dysfunctions, and studies using magnetic resonance imaging.

The most debated cases may be that of "wolf-children" raised outside human linguistic contact and that show an impoverished syntax. The fact that they never fully recover from their early deprivation of linguistic input clearly reveals an age-dependent effect of language acquisition in terms of ultimate attainment. Deaf late signers provide another case study. Mayberry (1993) has compared two groups of adults learning American Sign Language. The first group was deaf by birth and was not previously signing in any other language; they were therefore learning a first language

in adulthood. The second group consisted of people who became deaf after developing an oral language as their first language. As predicted by the hypothesis of a critical stage for the acquisition of a first language, the first group showed poorer performances. Another argument coming from a case of input impoverishment comes from people who are both deaf and blind. We know of examples like Hellen Keller, who became deaf and blind at the age of 18 months and developed with appropriate training a normal command of the language through touch. Babies born blind and deaf in environments that do not develop language by touch before a critical age do not later develop complex syntax (Smith 2002: 13-17). Likewise, the quality of recovery after acquired aphasia depends on the age at which aphasia has struck (Lenneberg 1967). Recovery is rarely complete when the injury occurs after puberty (with rare counterexamples, see Vargha-Khadem & al 1997). Finally, the few individuals with Down syndrome who achieve normal language proficiency are those whose language development was completed before the age of puberty (Rondal 1995). According to studies that have operationalized Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), the frontocortical area of a native language and a second language learned in adulthood form two separate spaces. The frontocortical area of a native language and an early second language are coincidental, whereas a language learned later in life occupies another area (Kim & al. 1997, Dehaene & al. 1997, Wattendorf & al. 2001). Still according to MRI, the very early practice of a language, even if interrupted, leaves traces in the brain (Pierce & al., 2015): children who spoke Chinese before French react differently from French monolinguals in the face of French-like invented words. This is true whether they always practice their first language or not. To this date, the exact nature of what MRI measures remains unclear, but this definitely indicates that there is a quantifiable cognitive difference between early bilingualism and late bilingualism.

The threshold for native-like acquisition of a first language is gradual from pre-birth to puberty, and individual variation is observed, but the critical age of first exposure is rarely set under three years old. This plays in favor of the nativeness of Breton for children coming from monolingual French households, because age of schooling in the French state is also around two or three years old, which is much earlier than in most European countries. Age of exposure to Breton is sometimes even smaller because a growing network of nurseries offers immersion in Breton since the end of the 90's (OPAB 2017, Le Pelleter 2017, 2018). Their number is still low: OPAB (2017) has counted 3000 children below three years old who had received at least some Breton linguistic input in nurseries in 2016, only 45 of which were in a Breton speaking environment for half or more of the time. For the moment, the former represents 1,9% of children in Brittany, and the latter 0.03%. Their impact on language development should however not be underestimated.

Mermet (2006) has recorded and quantified the number of Breton productions of kindergarten children in Pluvigner (vannetais) in the early 2000s. Age of exposure is one of the two key factors that he finds, with a doubling of the productions for the

children who came into contact with Breton in the first year of kindegarten compared to those who arrived in the second year (Mermet 2006: 98).

### 1.3. Consistency of the input

Consistency of the input (duration, quality, diversity) is another recurring key factor for the constitution of nativeness. Mermet (2006: 91) shows that there is a difference in the quantity of productions between children who stay in Breton kindergarten only during the mornings and children who also stay for lunch, napping time and afternoon. Richer contact leads to grammatical developments that are not observed in the less exposed children, like maturation of the addressee. Children aged 2 to 3 years speak to themselves or to an underspecified global entity, demonstrating a rather erratic addressee for their linguistic messages. Most of their utterances are repeated directly from the context. In a second phase, the grammatical concept of addressee emerges and the utterances are specifically directed towards another child or the teacher. This period of maturation of the addressee corresponds to a growing number of original utterances, with the child creating sentences of her own. This step is not observed in children with poorer language exposures. This means that when these children will eventually catch up later and start building syntactic structures of their own to produce original Breton sentences, they will probably have to recourse to partial transfer of syntactic structures previously built in French in order to do so (Stephens 2000), hence achieving a different cognitive operation.

Among the non-traditional younger generations of speakers included in the fieldwork of Kennard (2014, 2018), there is a cross-generational maintenance of the verb-second rule, however with consistent interpersonal variations, one of which depends on the type of input they have received in Breton schooling (bilingual vs. immersion). The natives by immersion give results similar to the older generations, minor some differences due to diglossia and the general impoverishment of the linguistic input available to them. Children who received reduced Breton input at school and are also deprived of Breton input at home form here a class with late learners. They show a reduced autonomy of their Breton grammar, and a greater influence of French structures.

Consistency of the input is a question for all modern native Breton speakers, in the sense that even speakers of inherited Breton that work in the language as adults still face diglossia in different domains. This type of acquisition is comparable to the situation of immigrants that receive input in their parents' language since an early age, but develop in contact with the dominant language of their immigration country. Some contrasts have to be noted between immigrant languages and languages that are minorized *in-situ*. First, the latter do not come with the language of a home country that could provide the linguist with a baseline for comparison. Second, immigrant heritage languages prototypically show a phonology that is similar to the baseline,

even when their productions are syntactically deviant or impoverished (Hualde 2015). The contemporary speakers of Breton seem to resist much better to French influence in their syntax than in their accentuation. This may be related, or not, to the fact that the early input of children contains productions of L2 speakers of different levels of proficiency, even inside the school system. This is not prototypical of immigrant languages.<sup>4</sup>

#### **1.4. Linguistic stress reveals nativeness in a bilingual case**

Nativeness is relatively easy to assess in monolingual cases. A child speaks a human language, or fails to do so entirely or in parts. Nativeness in early bilingual children is less straightforward. Both languages can be cognitively native, even if one can be dominant over the other. This is complicated by the fact that bilingual acquisitions can proceed in cognitive pathways unavailable to monolingual acquisition (see Grosjean 1989, and Kroll & al. 2015 for a state of the art review). Bilingual acquisition cannot be reduced to an addition of monolingual acquisition processes. This result is very important for the assessment of nativeness. It could be tempting to consider that a simple comparison of the productions of monolinguals and of bilinguals would give us assessment of nativeness in a given language. However, this would be comparing the results of processes that we know to be different. Instead, in bilingual cases, assessment of nativeness can be achieved if there are demonstrable contrasts with the productions of late learners, including highly proficient late learners.

Interacting in one's non-native language takes on greater cognitive resources than interacting in one's native language. In Schutter's (2013:203) terms; "near-native late L2 learners of a second language are perfectly capable of acquiring a native-like L2 grammar, but still produce non-native-like interface structures when pressurized through time and/or memory constraints". In other words, even if some late learners achieve near nativeness proficiency, they still react as second language speakers under linguistic stress. Even when both profiles of speakers have the same grammatical competences, L2 speakers bear stricter computational limitations that impact their performances.

Two different lines of evidence support this hypothesis. First, highly proficient L2 learners perform like natives when they are under linguistic stress (comprehension tasks with additional white noise McDonald 2006, fast grammaticality judgments Hopp 2009). Second, when both types of speakers undergo linguistic stress, their performances differ so as to reveal the native's advantage. Schutter (2013) has compared the syntactic competence and performance of native English speakers and

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<sup>4</sup> Similar observations are made on Basque. Hualde (2015) proposes that "the two areas [of Basque] that are most likely to be affected in an important way are pronunciation and lexical semantics, including phraseology."

advanced learners of English whose native language is Dutch. He uses linguistic stress in his elicitations so that speakers could no longer monitor their language comprehension and production (by shortened time window for answers, and overloads of the speakers working memory). He finds that despite the non-natives being as aware of the correct structures as the natives, their online performance declined when they were placed under extra processing load. In perception, the effect of white noise is also more dramatic on non-natives. Drozdova (2018) shows that there is a difference in language signal treatment between natives and non-natives when white noise is superimposed. Non-natives can learn to recognize unfamiliar voices and take recognition benefits from it, but they do not extend this advantage to lexical recognition, contrary to natives.

In the case of Breton, as is the case for endangered languages in general, the additional challenge in order to find evidence for (non)-nativeness is that the baseline is slippery. The speaker's performance and competence can be impacted by late or incomplete learning, so it can come from native impoverished input or installed diglossia. For illustration, the effect of non-nativeness on acoustic perception is well known in professional dubbing in the Breton film industry. J-M. Ollivier (p.c.) works as a sound engineer in the association *Dizale* that realizes the Breton dubbing of films. He reports that the Breton voices that he superimposes on the films systematically have to be set to a higher volume than the original ones. If not, Breton speakers, both actors and spectators, provide the negative feedback that "they don't hear properly". For what regards linguistic production under pressure, actors and directors in theater can testify that after long and emotionally draining creative sessions, even very proficient L2 speakers find relief in some brief moments of exchange in French, whereas this trigger for code-switching is not expressed by inherited natives. In my experience, Breton speakers who had early schooling in Breton also show individual variation in that respect, depending mostly on their actual practice of the language.

A syntactic test happens to set apart Breton speakers according to nativeness. The test consists of a translation task of a structure that is very simple in either French or English: *these thirty-one rocks* or *those twenty-one pens*. The Breton translation however poses serious syntactic problems. Breton dozen plus one cardinals are realized as discontinuous numeral (1). The head noun appears between the unity numeral and the dozen numeral. The unity /one/ is realized as *unan* in isolation or in continuous numerals. When it appears before the head noun however, like in a discontinuous numeral, its form is obligatorily that of an indefinite determiner *un*, *ul*, *ur* (1). This property makes it quite challenging to embed in a demonstrative, because demonstrative structures are also discontinuous, starting with an obligatory definite article like *an*, *al*, *ar* (2).

- (1)     *ur c'hreion warn-ugent*  
          a   pen        on    twenty

- (2) 'twenty-one pens'  
*ar c'hreion-mañ*  
 the pen-here  
 'this pen'

Forcing co-occurrence of the structures in (1) and (2) poses obvious problems, and all speakers comment on it. They have to decide how the two discontinuous structures are to be embedded the one inside the other. Both structures start with an article, but both seem incompatible because of a definiteness clash. Nowhere else in the language do two articles co-occur. Most speakers resist to the alignment of *an ur* at the beginning of a determiner phrase. The placement of the spatial deictic *-mañ* 'here' of the demonstrative inside that big compound is also often commented on, and speakers hesitate as to its cliticization host.

Both the reactions and the results to this test clearly set apart natives and non-natives. Even very proficient second language speakers of Breton typically stall, and have recourse to paraphrases as their only option. They typically refuse additional adjectives in the structure ('these thirty-one little/white/funny rocks') as an impossible overload. Second language speakers all have refused the alignment of *an ur...* or *ur an*. A semi-early bilingual (first language contact at eleven years old) has provided the structure in (3). In his solution, a prepositional strategy alleviates the problem. The problem of adjective placement is evacuated by the use of a diminutive. This was the best attempt of four proficient but non-native speakers. All the others willingly tried but had to give up on translating a structure such as *these thirty-one rocks*.

- (3) *an unan ha tregont a vaenigoù-mañ* [M.S. (01/2018)]  
 the one and thirty of stone.DIM.s-here  
 'these thirty-one little rocks'

Early natives, on the other hand, typically recognize that the translation is difficult, but they immediately recourse on their internal intuition and end up providing a translation for which they have great confidence in less than a minute. Some natives even achieve the task in carrying the extra burden of adjective placement. Interestingly, the concrete syntactic solutions proposed by the natives are far from uniform. In the following of this section, I illustrate below some of their answers.

M. Lincoln was schooled in Diwan and has been raised by second language parents in Leon. She has discontinuous numerals and she inserts the entire construction inside an analytical demonstrative as in (4). In (5), she allows for the *an ur...* collocation that has no counterpart in the language.

- (4) *Sell 'ta an [div logodenn warn-ugent]-mañ !* [M. Lincoln (01/2015)]  
 look then the two mouse on-twenty -here  
 'Look at these twenty-two mice!'



- (5) *an* [ *ur roc'h ha tregont* ]-se  
 the a rock and thirty -there  
 'those thirty one rocks'

M. Lincoln [07/2016]  
 reported in Jouitteau (2018)

Brendan Corre is native of the inherited Treger variety via his mother. He has discontinuous numerals (6). When confronted with the additional demonstrative analytic form, he drops the indefinite *ur* as a last resort strategy (7). Note that a lenition appears on the head noun for no apparent reason – this speaker otherwise treats *min* as a masculine noun (*ur min*, 'a rock'). The vowel may also have been altered, which could be the sign of inference of another dialect. Presented with the solution of M.L. in (5), the speaker has no hesitation to judge it strongly ungrammatical.

- (6) *ur min bihan gwenn ha tregont*  
 a rock little white and thirty  
 'thirty-one little white rocks'

[Brendan Corre (12/2017)]

- (7) *ar* [ \_ *vaen bihan gwenn ha tregont* ]-mañ  
 the \_ rock little white and thirty -here  
 'these thirty one white rocks.'

SLG. is native of the inherited Leon variety via her mother, with a second language Breton speaking father. She has been raised partly in the UK and is not fluent in French. She is fully trilingual with English and Spanish. She has discontinuous numerals with an abnormal mutation system (8). Her strategy is also to drop an article, but she chooses to drop the definite article in the analytical demonstrative (9). Comparing the *ur* and *un* forms of (8) and (9), it is possible that *un* in (9) could be an abbreviated form of the cardinal *unan*, but this instance of it would be before a head noun, contrary to the standard rule.

- (8) *ur kreion ha tregont*  
 a pen and thirty  
 'thirty-one pen'

[SLG. (08/2018)]

- (9) *un kreion ha tregont-mañ*  
 one pen and thirty-here  
 'these thirty-one pen'

J-M.O. conforms to the standard rule in allowing only for discontinuous numerals when a head noun is realized. However, when confronted with the demonstrative conundrum, he produces the continuous numeral as a last resort strategy, despite the presence of the head noun. In (10), *un* /ən/ realizes an abbreviated form of *unan* 'one'. This analysis is confirmed by the speakers who pronounce the entire form, like SLG.'s mother, inherited native from the dialect of Leon (11).

- (10) *an un' ha tregont mein-se* J-M. Ollivier [11/2017]  
the one and thirty rock-there reported in Jouitteau (2018)  
'those thirty one rocks.'
- (11) *an unan ha tregont kreion-mañ* mother of SLG.  
the one and thirty pen-here  
'these thirty one rocks.'

Speaker I.G., young adult who was schooled in Diwan, has no discontinuous numerals at all (12). In consequence, she has no problem to align the definite article *an* and the cardinal *un* (13), (14).

- (12) *un ha tregont kreion bihan gwenn, daou ha tregont kreion bihan gwenn*  
a and thirty pen little white two and thirty pen little white  
'thirty one little white pens, thirty-two little white pens'
- (13) *an un ha tregont kreion-mañ*  
the a and thirty pen-here  
'these thirty pens'
- (14) *Kasit an un ha tregont logodennig-se maez dioustu!* [I.G. (08/2018)]  
Send the a and thirty mouse.DIM-here out now  
'Get rid of those thirty one mice right now!'

Like I.G., M.La. was schooled in Diwan but left the Diwan school before lise. She has no discontinuous numerals, and alternates freely the abbreviated and non-abbreviated forms *un* and *unan* of the cardinal 'one' as in (15). Note that both these speakers show an unexpected idiosyncrasy: for both of them, as I.G. comments on, a plural form of the noun is optionally allowed with the *-se* form of the demonstrative (16), (17). This would be ungrammatical in Standard Breton or, as far as I know, in traditional dialects where cardinals and plural nominal forms are incompatible.

- (15) *an un ha tregont levr* [M.La. (08/2018)]  
the one and thirty book  
'the thirty-one books'
- (16) *an unan ha tregont levrioù-se* [M.La. (08/2018)]  
the one and thirty books-there  
'those thirty-one rocks'
- (17) *an un ha tregont kreionoù-se* [I.G. (08/2018)]  
the one and thirty pens-there  
'those thirty-one rocks'

Provided the above results, it is obvious that much has to be done in order to set apart, for Breton native speakers, what is inherited linguistic idiosyncrasy, syntactic individual creativeness or signs of language evolution under an impoverished sociology of the language. One conclusion however emerges: Breton natives, including speakers who had early Breton input only at school, do have answers for these translations, whereas very proficient second language speakers of the language do not. Linguistic stress and syntactic overload provide a test that sets apart natives and non-natives.

I conclude that children schooled early in Breton, with consistent input at school, should be included as natives. This of course has an impact when considering the weight of people who are actually Breton natives in the global population. This also has an impact on the estimations of Breton speakers who have received Breton at home: when early-schooled children have parents who do not speak Breton but have older siblings in the same school, one should not exclude the hypothesis that they in fact also have received early Breton input at home by their siblings. In the remaining of this paper, I will take stock of these results to discuss the sociolinguistic dimension of these findings.

### **1.5. Why bother about cognitive nativeness at all?**

The notion of nativeness developed here is cognitive nativeness. It does not touch the identity feelings of speakers, nor the linguistic effects of emotional attachment to different language varieties. However, I fail to see what social definition of nativeness would actually exclude people who are cognitively natives. Some scientists openly assume to ignore cognitive differences between natives and non-natives in the name of the pragmatism of applied linguistics (Davies 2013:23). They propose to focus on the notion of *new speakers*, regardless of the nativeness of their practice. This is understandable in the sense that no speaker would report social difficulties due to an impossibility to translate exactly *these thirty-one mice*: all profiles of speakers would avoid this conundrum and use any of the many more natural paraphrases available in the language. However, this line of academic work sends the native/non-native divide into the political dimension of the concept. By doing so, the negation of the existence of young natives aligns with the narratives of dominant nationalisms. These narratives have a powerful and direct effect on the funding affected to linguistic policies in the French context. Ignoring these effects in the name of pragmatism is non-sensical. Academic works that focus on the politicization of the notion of nativeness certainly should not be blind to the political impact it has in the extra-linguistic world.

In this first section, I have shown evidence for the cognitive nativeness of different profiles of young Breton speakers. This raises the question of their invisibilisation in cultural representations. How does this happen, and why?

## **2. *Native Breton speakers and how they disappear***

In this section, I address the culture of invisibilisation of Breton natives. I first approach the invisibility of Breton natives in society. I show how the figure of native speakers of Breton in low-Brittany approach the symbolic figure of the ghost. Both

are symbolically associated with a mythological past despite their irruption into the present. Concrete signs of their presence trigger social anxiety because the available cultural representations suppose their non-existence. They are paradoxically said to be everywhere, but are mostly invisible.

## **2.1. Invisibility in society**

The lack of visibility for Breton speakers in general is first due to the absolute numbers of speakers, which are now quite low (Broudic 2010 and references therein). The total number of speakers was estimated at 1 100 000 people around 1950. Since the end of the Second World War, Breton has lost 85% of its speakers in 60 years (Broudic 2009). According to the TMO *Regions Institute survey* (2007), 172,000 Breton speakers (90%) resided in Western Brittany, a drop of 30% in ten years since the estimation of 1999. In 2007, only 35,000 speakers declared using Breton daily, and occasional practice is clearly predominant. Broudic (2010) estimates there are only 12,000 speakers of Breton in the age group of 25-50 years, many of them L2 speakers with great individual differences in their command of the language. The social spaces associated with the practice of Breton are more and more restricted. In 2018, the *Regional council* has published an estimation of over 200.000 Breton speakers, which is surprisingly high compared to the previous numbers (see TMO 2018, and Jakez 2018 for discussion). The number of speakers could have been slightly underestimated, because all surveys so far have relied on self-reporting (as opposed to actual translation abilities, see Rybková 2012). Uncertainty in the exact number of speakers does not shed doubt on the fact that the global situation is a fast decrease of the speakers.<sup>5</sup>

The Breton language still lacks societal visibility outside of museography and bilingual road signs. First, Breton speakers are an invisible minority. They are not detectable when they speak French, as they show the same local accents than French monolinguals. Second, the language innovates social places for the language that have in common to remain invisible to non-Breton speakers. The largest periodical *Ya* had 1,200 subscribers in 2010, and some other titles for teenagers and children also exist, but non-Breton speakers would not see it on a newsstand because Breton press is

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<sup>5</sup> Rybková (2012) finds in a pilot study that self-declaration and actual mastering of the language may differ for Breton. She finds that 35% (compare with the 25% of TMO 2007) of respondents can express themselves in Breton with high or middle accuracy, and translate from French to Breton. Her results still have to be replicated because she had operated on a small sample of only 108 speakers. 20 of respondents also joined the sample on personal demand, which induces a bias towards militant and/or fluent Breton speakers. In contrast with Breton, Welsh speakers tend to over-report themselves as good Welsh speakers. Jones (2018) reports that for fMRI testing procedures on Welsh speakers in Wales, overestimations of self-reported linguistic abilities are to be expected. Jones had to eliminate some subjects from the study because they had declared themselves bilingual, whereas their abilities turned out to be too limited for them to be included in the study.

available only on subscription. In television, the public service broadcasts only 70 hours of programs in Breton per year, and four radios broadcast partially or exclusively in Breton on their respective territories. Most of Breton visibility is now on the Internet. The web-TV *Brezhoweb* offers a monthly program in the form of a two-hour talk show and various other programs (sitcom, youth show, dubbing films ...). Radios offer podcasts. Social media provide space for Breton-speaking groups for free, search engine make them easy to reach. Job announcements in Breton can be found on the website of the OPAB or *Ubapar* (*Union Bretonne pour l'Animation des Pays Ruraux*, 'Breton union for the animation of the rural areas')... These new tools are easily accessible to anyone who looks for it, but remain perfectly inconspicuous to non-Breton speakers. In 2007, the *Office of the Breton Language* has created "spilhennig", a pin for Breton speakers to wear on their clothes in order to recognize themselves in public. Again, the logo is not self-explanatory and tells nothing to non-Breton speakers. As a result, in the same neighborhood, some people can live a bilingual life with Breton as a dominant language, and their neighbor can ignore the very possibility of it.

## **2.2. Symbolic association with the past**

Symbolic association of the Breton language with the past participates to its invisibilisation. This effect is most clear in the profile of speakers that come from Breton speaking families but do not speak it themselves. For them, intimately, Breton is associated with their own ancestors, as well as with their familial or personal linguistic rupture with them. Symbolically, Breton stands as a notion meaningfully opposed to their familial present. If they were aware of the various actual Breton practices in their present, these non-Breton speakers could consider that the Breton/past association, while relevant to their family history, is less so to contemporary Breton speakers. Instead, when confronted with expressions of the language by both natives and L2 speakers, they show different forms of resentment. A classic one is to reproach (in French) to young Breton speakers that their Breton fails to reproduce the intonation that they were used to hear with their relatives. Much work needs to be done on the specific attitude of non-Breton speakers towards Breton. When discussion is possible, some of the factors that people express for themselves include shame, jealousy or fear. Some fear the re-enactment of the linguistic social stigma on the lower social classes that were the last to reach access to French. Some individuals interpret others speaking Breton as a comment on their own linguistic disability, or as a sign of voluntary exclusion, leading to much distress and triggering various defence mechanisms.

The confusion between monolinguals and natives feeds the representation, against factual data, that Breton is not spoken natively anymore. The low visibility of Breton speaking practices adds to this effect, to the point that real world manifestations of Breton speakers can be perceived as anachronistic and ultimately

frightening: the symbolic figure of the Breton speaker is at the same time dead and alive. This representation feeds itself: any manifestation of Breton in modern life then becomes a proof of its ghost nature.<sup>6</sup>

### **2.3. Some concrete examples of cultural invisibilisation**

As a linguist working on Breton since two decades, I have encountered numerous reactions in France with respect to my object of study. I found some of them particularly telling because they show the same logic conundrum: French citizens tend to have strong opinions on Breton speakers but they claim at the same time that those people do not exist. This cognitive dissonance is remarkable and leads to emotionally charged reactions, in which logic seems particularly challenged. This section aims at providing non-French readers with some concrete examples of how social invisibilisation of Breton natives plays in Brittany. These examples are not supposed to convince the reader, because they remain fundamentally anecdotic facts. They are aimed at displaying the kind of syllogisms and logic conundrums typically encountered in fieldwork on non-French languages in France. These reactions may seem illogical, and they are. They follow however a very clear logic, internally to the French culture.

In 2013, I was presented during a social event to a private physiotherapist in Brest. The man, in his thirties, asked for my advice as a linguist on a professional matter. He had recently worked with a family whose parents were addressing their child of pre-school age in Breton during the consultation. His question to me was if he should have reported the parents to social services for child abuse. I told him that in my opinion, no harm was done to the child by speaking a language to him. He was worrying about the child's access to French. I ensured him that the overwhelming presence of the French language in Breton society would provide the child with enough input for her to end up bilingual. The physiotherapist then expressed the concern that this child would then speak Breton, a language that "nobody really speaks". I could not make him see the complete circularity of his argument: his first concern was that people were indeed speaking it family-internally. He was genuinely worried, and seemed fully unaware of the discriminating dimension of his concern, not to mention the aggravating circumstance of it coming from professional medical care. This child, as a native Breton speaker, finds himself in a rather peculiar situation: his existence is felt shocking because of his very presupposed non-existence. He produces the effect of a ghost.

Academy is not exempt from the ghost effect on Breton native speakers, not even linguists. When I was graduating at the university of Nantes, a psycholinguist

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<sup>6</sup> For the ethnopsychiatric hypothesis that Celtic cultures accomodate subworlds and "double-realities" in their representation of their present, see Carrer (1999:131).

teacher refused Breton as my topic of choice for the paper of his class on language acquisition. I had proposed this topic for commodity reasons because I was teaching in the neighboring Breton immersion school *Diwan* at the time, and had the access and trust that would have made the research easy with the families. His justification for refusal was that the entire enterprise was undoable because of a supposed impossibility that the children were speaking Breton at home (“Don’t tell me Breton mummies play pickaboo in Breton with their babies!” he ordered). It is important to note that in academia, the unchecked belief that a phenomenon is non-existent was performative: this teacher’s attitude ensured the non-existence of that particular study on that particular phenomenon, and so participated in its academic invisibility.

Native speakers themselves are not immune to the ghost effect. Numerous times have I had people telling me *in Breton* that they were not Breton speakers, let alone natives, to the point that I started considering it as first contact classic in elicitations. The same speakers could five minutes later explain that they were Breton monolinguals for the seven to eight first years of their pre-school life, and that they never interrupted practice of the language. This self-erasure is consistent with a widely noticed self-depreciation of linguistic authenticity. “Speakers display a tendency to assess their own Breton as inferior, uneducated, and imperfect” (Adkins 2013, see also Moal 2016).

In the last section, I concentrate on the invisibilisation of Breton native speakers in academic discourse itself.

#### **2.4. Invisibility in academic discourse: natives vs. new speakers**

The notion of *new speaker* is emerging as a central notion in the field of the sociolinguistic of minority languages in Europe (O’Rourke and Pujolar 2013, Smith-Christmas 2018, among many others, and for Breton Hornsby 2014, Moal 2017, Davies-Deacon 2017, Moal & al. 2018 ...). The figure of the new speaker is explicitly constructed around second-language learners, and is used in opposition to the figure of the native speaker.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> An anonymous reviewer points out that the notion of *new speaker* does not necessarily always exclude natives (“the term new speaker *usually* implies that the speaker has not acquired a traditional variety of the language at home from their parents in the normal way, but that does not necessarily mean they are “non-natives” or have the characteristics of an L2 learner”). Indeed, O’Rourke and al. (2015: 1) and McLeod and O’Rourke (2015:1) define *new speakers* as “individuals with little or no home or community exposure to a minority language but who instead acquire it through immersion or bilingual educational programs, revitalization projects or as adult language learners”. McLeod and O’Rourke (2015:1) however next proceed to a careful exploration of the contrast between... new speakers and natives. Some articles prefer to systematize the opposition new/traditional speaker (e.g. Nance 2015). The fact is that the notion of *new speaker* sometimes explicitly excludes and sometimes explicitly includes natives, and some other times is used without explicit definition of its content with respect to nativeness of the speakers, which allows for alternative interpretations. My point is that this terminological indecision leads to the overall conflation of profiles of speakers that are cognitively different, a difference which is sometimes relevant across different fields of linguistics.

- (18) “New speakers, from this perspective, are all multilingual citizens who, by engaging with languages *other than their* “native” or “national” language(s), need to cross existing social boundaries, re-evaluate their own levels of linguistic competence and creatively (re)structure their social practices to adapt to new and overlapping linguistic spaces.”

*Description of the COST European program,  
IS1306 - New Speakers in a Multilingual Europe - Opportunities and Challenges  
<https://www.cost.eu/actions/IS1306>*

Multilingualism in Europe and the cultural representations of late-learners is of great interest for what concerns the future of minority languages, some of which are now greatly endangered. However, this terminology implicates that the younger generations of Breton speakers, the *new speakers*, are all non-natives. As noted by Nance (2015), in Brittany, this choice of terminology is in line with the term of *neo Breton speaker* as used in Le Dû (1997), who considers explicitly that there is “a ditch separating *neo Breton speakers* and speakers of *inherited varieties*”.<sup>8,9</sup>

This terminology neglects the social existence and relevance of two types of young native speakers. First, the young speakers of inherited Breton, and second, the young speakers who had consistent Breton input before the age of five years old by early schooling in immersion systems. It is scientifically misleading to apprehend the production of young modern speakers in general and to draw from it conclusions on non-native *new speakers*. For illustration, when Davies-Deacon (2017) observes the Breton lexicon used on social media, she is studying the conversations of Breton speakers having access to the Internet, both natives and non-natives. Her conclusions

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<sup>8</sup> Le Dû (1997): “les difficultés d’intercompréhension orale entre bretonnants de régions diverses sont bien connues, sinon exagérées, sans parler du fossé qui sépare néo-bretonnants et locuteurs des parlers hérités”. The French term *néo-bretonnant* adds a terminological confusion with ‘speakers of a new form of Breton’. The suffix *-onnant* imports a pejorative dimension to the term, due to an imperfective effect (*chanter* ‘to sing’ > *chantonner* ‘to sing imperfectly, partially or without the lyrics’ or *mâcher* ‘to chew’ > *mâchonner* ‘to chew imperfectly, or without ending point’, see Tovenia and Kihm 2008 for an analysis of this suffix in Romance). This pejorative derivation is not available to refer to a ‘French speaker’ (*francophone* but *\*franconnant*, *#francisant*). A reviewer suggests that the choice of the *-onnant* /ɔnã/ suffix simply derives from the language name *Breton* ending in the nasal vowel /ɔ̃/. However, the morphologically regular *brittophone* is available, with the desired non-pejorative semantic reading of ‘Breton speaker’. The suffix *-onnant* is also not restricted to nasal endings (neither *chantonner* nor *mâchonner* above end in a nasal vowel). The *-on* ending does favours the choice of *-onnant*, but only over its variant *-isant* that has the same pejorative/imperfective meaning. In French, speakers of non-French languages are commonly referred to by such derivations in *-isant*. When the language is of low status, the two forms tend to alternate, like in *occitanisant* vs. *occitanophone* ‘Occitan speaker’. When the language has State status, the use of the two forms is clearly differentiated *hispanisant* ‘speaker or object of Spanish style or somehow related to Spanish or Spain’ vs. *hispanophone* ‘Spanish speaker (neutral)’.

<sup>9</sup> The notion of nativeness is hard to grasp in Jones (1995, 1998). She states that standardized literary Breton has “no particular French influence”, but that its spoken version “shows French influence in its syntax but not in its lexicon”. She next derives this supposed difference between the oral and written forms by postulating that the oral form is spoken by *néo-bretonnants*, defined as non-natives. This amounts to say that only diatopic varieties are natively spoken. However, in her conclusion, Jones (1995) makes the prediction that Standard Breton will in the future become what she calls a “xenolect”, a term she defines as a “slightly foreignized varieties *spoken natively*, which are not Creoles because they have not undergone significant restructuring”.



bear on speakers with historically new communication habits and new sociological profiles, but not precisely on *new speakers* defined as non-natives. The presence of native productions in social media opens the question of their linguistic influence on the other speakers. This question cannot be addressed with the *new speaker* terminology that specifically excludes the natives.

The *new speaker* terminology is aimed at preventing the museification and essentialization of native speakers (O'Rourke and Pujolar 2013:53), but its consequence, when it negates the existence of new profiles of young natives, is to freeze the figure of natives modeled on a heraldic representation of the older generations. The negation by implication of the existence of young natives adds to the already minority situation of Breton native speakers among other young Breton speakers, inside the broader minority context of the Breton language. This negation of existence is detrimental because it is also performative, a property which I will illustrate with two concrete examples. Every year in the fall, a large promotional campaign places posters all across Brittany advertising for Breton classes for adults (*J'apprends le breton!* 'I learn Breton!'). To non-speakers of Breton, such campaigns represent the most conspicuous sign of the presence of Breton in society. For natives however, these posters are merely a reminder of their minorized situation because the addressee of the poster has to learn the language in order to speak it. This message *in fine* participates to their symbolic erasure from the collective representation. The same problem is noticeable concerning cultural events in the Breton language. Public linguistic policies that are directed towards new speakers need to ensure that the cultural events provide adequate pedagogical material for language learning. Public servants find themselves in a position to judge what artistic creation deserves public financial support with a language learning criteria in mind. Artists and cultural structures of course behave accordingly. This would be destructive in any language, but it is disastrous in the case of the fragile artistic structures that produce a cultural offer in minority languages. From the point of view of natives, having a cultural offer answering pedagogical criteria is of no interest, as it only impoverishes the cultural offer available to them.

### **3. Conclusion**

I have shown that there are objective signs of cognitive nativeness in different profiles of young Breton speakers. Immersion nurseries and early schooling can provide speakers with sufficiently early input to react to syntactic tests as native speakers once they have reached adulthood. I have discussed a pilot study that induces linguistic stress on syntactic structures. The test tells apart natives from second language learners, and provides linguistic evidence for two classes of young Breton native speakers: on the one hand, traditional young natives with parental linguistic

input, and on the other hand, natives whose early input comes only from early consistent Breton immersion schooling. The representation that native Breton speakers exclusively pertain to the older or long gone generations is thus inaccurate. It should be rejected as such in the field of linguistics, and studied for its very inaccuracy in the field of sociolinguistics.

More research is of course needed on the syntax of the minority of young speakers that demonstrate nativeness in their language, in order to understand how their language evolves (or not) in its heavily diglossic context. The young research field of heritage languages is promising in this respect, because it provides tools to study linguistic native varieties with input impoverishment. Language policies in this regard have to concentrate on the quality of the early linguistic input received by children. Language policies should for example ensure that insufficiently secure L2 speakers could not find themselves electing nurseries or young children's classes as their career of choice on the idea that it could be less linguistically challenging than working with older children. Much remains to be done concerning the syntactic competence and sociological influence of the different profiles of natives of the Breton language, including also a profile that is not addressed here: the passive speakers (9% of the Breton self-declared "speakers" in Karaez, OPAB 2014).

Concerning the sociolinguistic approach of Breton speakers, the very existence of young Breton natives calls into question the widely used notion of *new speaker*. As long as the notion of *new speaker* is constructed in opposition to speakers demonstrating linguistic nativeness, the notion of *new speakers* co-organizes the invisibility of the young native speakers by evacuating them from modernity. This is scientifically inaccurate, and directly detrimental to those speakers who live in an already minorized situation. Ultimately, it can also be detrimental to language revitalization policies, which concentrate their efforts on second language learners without valorizing the existing richness and potential of their young generations of natives.

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