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The Breton Language : from Taboo to Recognition

Introduction

In 1993, while doing a study among students from the public high-school of Landerneau (Finistère) on individual and family practice of the Breton language, I observed the following reactions. When I presented the theme of my study, many students could not help laughing, others blushed and only a few of the "best" students sitting in the front row remained calm, raising their hand to ask for further technical details. This was exactly the behavior that my junior high-school classmates and I had adopted twenty years ago while attending a class on sexual education... This awakened my curiosity. Might there be a link between the repression of the Breton language and the repression of sexuality ? Later in the 1990's, as I was carrying out semi-directive interviews on Breton identity, this premonition seemed to be confirmed by the lapsus or the embarrassment expressed by several of the adults being questioned. Some of them seemed to harbor a secret and deep-seeded discomfort regarding issues of language and identity. These questions evoked something dirty and immoral, perhaps even dangerous, which should be hidden at all cost. Was this not a taboo, or the remains of a taboo ? This is the hypothesis I shall be presenting here. As far as the Breton language is concerned, there remains a taboo. A policy of recognition is needed for such a taboo to be lifted once and for all.

I. The Taboo

"Taboo" is a Polynesian word meaning a prohibition system of a sacred nature applied to something impure. If one admits that we are indeed dealing with a taboo, then the "sacred" might well be the French Republic "one and undivided", which supposedly liberates individuals from community oppression and gives them access to modernity and to universality. That which is Breton would then be considered "impure", such as "tradition", which inhibits individuals and binds them to their social condition and to their ancestral territory. Finally the prohibition system would be mainly, but not only, enforced by the school system. During the entire first half of the century schools did indeed punish children who spoke Breton, and went so far as to set up a system encouraging them to tell on each other, thus giving them a humiliating image of themselves. Yet in the broader sense, the prohibition system is not limited only to schools. From the 19th century until the second World War,

images of backward Bretons and of an insignificant and ridiculous Brittany were spread across France by way of literature¹, popular writings, travel guides, comic books, songs, figurines, etc. The comic-book character, Becassine, a good-for-all maid "so stupid but so devoted"², is a perfect illustration of the widespread image of Brittany as folkloric and ridiculous. As a result of all this, many generations of Bretons have harbored feelings of shame, even perhaps of self-loathing, leading them to repress their singularity - most notably the pleasure of practicing their mother tongue - as if these were inadmissible practices. Today this shame and self-hatred are far from having disappeared. They are latent among many Bretons, and especially present among those who felt particularly stigmatized for their language or their accents. Such is the case of Aline (a farmer born in 1960) who compares the Breton language to an infirmity.

Aline : When I was little in school it was almost shameful to live in an environment like we had at home. I mean, to have parents who always spoke to us in Breton (...) We felt this to be a defect. And we had to hide it. So we considered it a bit like an abscess that we shouldn't show. (...) In my opinion, that's what it's like. Like someone who has a lump on his back. It's a handicap³.

Helen, born in 1953 and married to a fisherman, describes how her accent represents the trauma of her life.

Helen : I'm a bit embarrassed because of my Breton accent. And ever since I was very small in school I was teased because of it. And that stayed with me until today. (...) I was embarrassed, really embarrassed, yes. (...) Even though at home I was forbidden to speak Breton. My parents always spoke Breton and forbade us to answer in Breton. Forbidden ! (...) My teachers often told me... Teasing me a little. They said : "But it's going to prevent you from finding work !" (...) Sometimes I'd say to myself : "Oh, if I could have lived somewhere else, if I could go away... " (...) I even cried about it for a while. Really. I was really affected ! (...) So when someone came to the house, like now, the way you just arrived, I would leave. I would go out of the house. I would go down to the river, over there⁴.

Despite these terrible examples, it seems that today the taboo is progressively being lifted.

¹ For instance : Balzac, *Les Chouans*, Victor Hugo, *Quatrevingt-treize* and Flaubert, *Par les champs et par les grèves*.

² Ory, Pascal, « La Bretagne dans la littérature enfantine et la bande dessinée », in Balcou et Le Gallo (ed.), *Histoire littéraire et culturelle de la Bretagne*, Paris-Genève, Champion-Slatkine, 1987, t. 3, p. 373.

³ Le Coadic, Ronan, *L'Identité bretonne*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes and Terre de Brume, 1998, p. 197.

⁴ *Idem*, p. 187.

II. Recognition

The first sign that the taboo is being lifted is that for some time now one has been hearing much talk about the Breton language, especially in the press and in regional media. In fact so much so that a reporter at *Ouest-France*¹ wrote : "As far as the Breton language is concerned, the less it is spoken, the more it is talked about"... Indeed, the rates of practice of the Breton language continue to decrease : from 75 % at the beginning of the century, they have gone down to 17 % in the 1990's (approximately 240 000 speakers). The taboo is being lifted because the Breton language presently poses much less of a threat to French unity. Nowadays there are no more monolingual native speakers of Breton, and the rate of practice is so low that the few remaining people who still consider the language to be a threat to the Republic appear to be waging an out of date battle. Presently, 88 % of those living in lower-Brittany think it "necessary to preserve the Breton language"². The ambiguity lies in this notion of "preservation". Do we want to preserve traces of our linguistic heritage in the same way that we preserve totems in museums ? Or do we want to lift the implicit prohibition which still weighs upon many minds and encourage both popular practice of the Breton language and its transmission through the generations ?

Lifting the taboo would mean bringing Bretons to sincerely believe that expressing oneself in Breton is not shameful, and consequently, that they can pass on their language to their children. Today we are still far from having reached such a point. While young militants have struggled for recognition of the Breton language, for visibility within French society, and for the language to be taught in schools and used in the media, in practice they have not been followed by native speakers of the language. Members of the latter group (retired people, farmers, factory workers and artisans), are mostly over fifty years old, relatively uneducated and settled in rural areas. Their practice of the Breton language is endogamous. In other words, they only speak Breton with people who belong to the same milieu as themselves (family members, friends, neighbors), or sometimes with individuals whose age, accent, demeanor and behavior indicate that they belong to a similar social group. When a young person speaks Breton it disturbs their image of the world. Except perhaps in recent years, ever since media coverage of the *Diwan*³ schools has made them so popular. Nowadays, meeting a child who speaks Breton has entered the realm of possibilities for native speakers, but they still regard it as unreal and artificial. When this happens, the first thing they do is ask the parents whether the child attends a *Diwan* school. Then they attempt to exchange a few words in Breton with the child. But very rapidly they prefer to switch to French, considering that "they do not speak the same Breton" or that the child speaks "real Breton". As long as native speakers remain passive witnesses to the cultural revival, the rate of transmission of the

¹ *Ouest-France* is a regional daily newspaper. It has the highest circulation of any French daily newspaper.

² Results of a poll on the practice of Breton done on a sample of 2 500 people by the TMO Ouest Institute in March-April of 1997, for *Le Télégramme* and France 3 Ouest. Cf. *Le Télégramme*, April 12-13, 1997, last page.

³ The *Diwan* schools are cooperative schools in the Breton language, created in 1977. Their popularity has led to the creation of public and private catholic schools offering bilingual classes. 6 000 children are presently enrolled in the bilingual sections.

language will remain close to zero¹. For indeed, new speakers of Breton are too few to have any real impact on overall statistics. What can be done to reverse the tendency ? Here are a few suggestions.

First of all, it would be useful to admit that there is a taboo, or rather that it existed in the past and has left wounds which remain unhealed. In order to free native speakers from their embarrassment, one must act positively. *Diwan* has done this by creating a parallel school system. Any form of demand expressed through negative actions (violence, vandalism, etc.) is likely to "recharge" the taboo like a battery and to confront the native speakers once again with their negative identity.

Secondly, a policy of recognition should be developed. As Charles Taylor explains : "recognition is not simply a way of being polite to people, it is a vital human need"². If such a policy is developed by the Republican State, which is still considered in some ways as sacred, it will have immediate effects. However, it is obvious that the State will enforce such a policy only if it is firmly encouraged to do so. The Breton militants have been expressing such encouragement for years now. I wish however to point out that a policy of recognition should not come only from the State, but it should begin with the promoters of the Breton language themselves.

Recognition begins with humility. All those who have worked at collecting idioms will agree to the following : each conversation with a native speaker offers treasures of unknown expressions and words, colorful images and wonderful proverbs to those who knows how to listen. The wealth of those born with the Breton language is immeasurable. Yet it is not always easy for the young, urban, well-educated militants, often working in the academic and intellectual professions, to see that in the backwoods of the countryside, the most humble speakers remain the true kings of the Breton language. This, however, is the most important fact. Yet as long as native speakers do not value it and do not pass it on to their children, their wealth remains unproductive. This is why its value must be recognized.

In order to do this, one must first of all heighten the neo-Breton speakers' awareness of the fact that learning any language necessarily entails immersing oneself among native speakers. Too often do we forget this obvious fact. Yet the truth is that colloquial Breton is made up of a variety of dialects found mainly in rural areas. Moreover, as we mentioned earlier, it is not considered "natural" in such an environment to be speaking in Breton to a young person, especially if the youngster is from the city. In order to communicate with native speakers, young neo-Breton speakers will therefore have to overcome their elders' resistance. With this objective in mind, they will have to become familiar with those living in rural areas. This requires them to they learn three lessons : first, some notions of dialectology ; second, practical knowledge of a few of the social codes most in use among those living in a rural environment ; third, a capacity to reflect upon the meaning of their own practice and upon the kind of language they wish to use and to transmit. Once these basic lessons have been learned, different types of training may be proposed.

The fact that throughout Brittany one finds approximately 240 000 native speakers should make it possible to set up an organized network of internships among rural families, for the benefit of those adults who wish to learn the language. The impact of such a network would be great. It would improve the quality of the

¹ Laurent, Loeiz, « La connaissance du breton », *Octant*, n° 56-57, 1993, pp. 7-12.

² Taylor, Charles, *Multiculturalisme. Différence et démocratie*, Paris, Flammarion, 1994, p. 42.

language learned by adults, while at the same time having a psychological impact upon the native speakers whose language would thus be given more recognition. This might eventually bring them to develop a desire to read and write in their language.

Indeed, almost all native speakers of Breton are illiterate in their native language. Teaching them how to read and write should be a priority. Yet, strangely enough, there are practically no such training for those whose mother tongue is Breton, even though when it is offered reactions are quite favorable.

In addition to this, a simple policy aimed at helping children learn good quality Breton could be set up in schools. Each child would be required to meet regularly with an "elderly friend" living in his or her neighborhood. Elderly people would no doubt be very happy to make such a contribution and to receive the visit of a child to whom they could pass on part of their linguistic heritage.

In order to carry out the above mentioned steps it would be very useful to develop teaching materials which combine the vernacular language and the more classical written language. Such efforts have already been made, and should be encouraged. Finally, one might create opportunities for Breton-speakers from the city and Breton-speakers from the countryside to meet with each other, by, for example, inviting native speakers to visit schools or language classes, or by sending schoolchildren and students to visit the homes of native-speakers. The ideal solution would be to set up several permanent meeting centers, offering various types of cultural activities, likely to attract both types of speakers and whose function would be to encourage regular exchanges.

Conclusion

Is the Breton language's present popularity merely a mean for cultural distraction or is it a sign of reproduction ? If the first hypothesis is true, rates of transmission among locals are likely to remain very low and the practice of Breton limited to a happy few. In this case, the language would likely become the cultural capital of a small community, similar to other present day minority groups who are sometimes at risk of living in a closed environment. The attempts at revival we are witnessing today might, as always in cases of endogamy, produce a strange fruit : a half-baked language made up of Breton or neo-Breton words and of French syntax and pronunciation.

In order for the natural reproduction of a living species to take place, two different partners must come together. As far as the Breton language is concerned, these two partners are the native speakers and the neo-Breton speakers.