Geolinguistic Continuities in the Celto-Atlantic Area and in Western Europe

Daniel Le Bris

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Philology

An International Journal
on the Evolution of Languages, Cultures and Texts

Peter Lang

Vol. 3/2017

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Geolinguistic Continuities in the Celto-Atlantic Area and in Western Europe

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Abstract Referring to the traditional "Kurgan theory", the archaeological discoveries of the last thirty years show at an overwhelming majority that there is no evidence of an Indo-European invasion during the 4th Millennium BC at the European level[1]. Reconsidering the origin of European languages in that new perspective, it appears that the Celts would not have migrated from a territory situated between Austria and southern Germany, as has been generally accepted since the nineteenth century. They could have settled since the end of Upper Palaeolithic and the Mesolithic as groups of fishermen and seafarers along the Atlantic shores from the Iberian Peninsula to the British Isles through ancient Gaul. On the basis of dialectal and geolinguistic data, the present approach tries to better understand this hypothesis. Studying geolinguistic variations, it considers the Celto-Atlantic area and the exchanges that may have been established in the long term with the neighbouring linguistic Germanic and Romance areas. New lexical borrowings from Celtic to Romance and Germanic (and vice versa) open research perspectives and raise real questions about the continuity of language and population areas in the Atlantic zone of Europe.

Keywords geolinguistics, Celtic languages, Celto-atlantic continuity.

This study derives from several reflections based on the research carried out by the geolinguists who have contributed to the two major European multilingual atlases: the *Atlas Linguarum Europae* (ALE) and the *Atlas Linguistique Roman* (AliR). The sources used for this study are data collected in the field from native dialect speakers mainly in the course of the 20th century. The primary materials of geolinguistics are thus based on rural or maritime speeches whose social use has been declining in many sectors of the European continent in parallel with the development of the market economy. Fortunately, these local dialects have been collected and studied from the beginning of the 20th century to our days. The recorded data have been compiled in the numerous linguistic atlases which are now open to a

1 I am very grateful to Jean Le Dû for his proofreading.

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vast domain of interpretation thanks to the new electronic mapping tools taking into account the recent research carried out in the fields of archæology, prehistory, ethnology, palæoanthropology and genetics.

Conservative speeches

Rural speeches are peripheral. Unlike what happens in urban areas, they seem immutable while the social and economic changes occurring within their societies are slow. In fact, the main observable change is a radical shift from the local dialect to the national official language (Le Dû, 2013). The conservatism of the dialects is explained by the huge social gap between the educated classes and the dialect speakers, who have often remained illiterate and isolated from urban centres. This view on linguistic change is just the opposite of the traditional one which, according to the Tree Model, places the origin of the dialects between the disappearance of the languages of Antiquity considered as fossils and the birth of modern languages in the Middle Ages.

Languages, and more specifically local speeches, are not living natural organisms in constant evolution. On the opposite, they are conservative and evolve very slowly under the pressure of geographical and ethnic contacts and socio-cultural transformations (Alinei, 1996).

Linguistic areas and boundaries within the framework of the ALE

The major concern of the ALE researchers may not be the limitation of data's publication distributed more or less predictably on a scale that is simply greater than the one of the national atlases. Within the framework of this continental atlas, the priority objective of geolinguistics is the search for profound affinities across borders and linguistic and cultural areas rather than that of divergences (Alinei 1994).

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Some researches, notably those of Mario Alinei (1996–2000) and Marcel Otte (1995), have for thirty years seriously called into question the Indo-European invasion theory. They insisted on the incompatibility of the Indo-European chronology model with the new linguistic and archæological discoveries. They also stressed the fact there was no archæological evidence of the major Indo-European invasion which was supposed to have taken place around the fourth millenium BC. Jean-Paul Demoule (1999) has been sharing the same view since the end of the XXth century. He irrevocably stated again in his book *Mais où sont passés les Indo-Européens?* (2014, p. 593):

> The Indo-European canonical, arborescent, centrifugal and invading Indo-European model is undoubtedly the poorest, the least interesting and the least convincing model that can be offered to account for the undeniable links that exist between languages and myths, if not genes in a portion of Eurasia. It comes up against many contradictions and does not allow for a satisfactory archaeological solution.[2]

Mario Alinei, whose research is based on geolinguistics, archaeology and anthropology, proposes the Palaeolithic Continuity Paradigm (PCP: see ‹www.continuitas.org›). Based on concordances between dialectal and archæological areas, this model shows that the lexicon of the present-day European dialects retains part of prehistoric features, thus attesting the unbroken presence in Europe of both Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages and populations since the Upper Paleolithic. According to the PCP, the Celts would have settled the Atlantic coasts from the Iberian Peninsula to Armorica and Scotland since the Upper Palaeolithic and the Mesolithic (Alinei, 1996–2000; Alinei - Benozzo, 2006; 2009; 2012; Benozzo, 2010; Ballester, 2012).

The present study does not focus on the Celtic area, but tries to use this geolinguistic reality as a way of questioning the notion of language and population continuity in the Atlantic area of Europe (Le Bris, 2012). Instead of working solely from a philological viewpoint, this study tries to question the notion of cultural and linguistic area using dialectal materials collected on the ground from the lips of dialects speakers.

2 “Le modèle indo-européen canonique, arborescent, centrifuge et invasionniste est indubitablement le plus pauvre, le moins intéressant et le moins convaincant qui puisse être offert pour rendre compte des indéniables apparentements entre des langues et des mythes, sinon des gènes, d’une partie de l’Eurasie. Il se heurte à de très nombreuses contradictions et n’autorise aucune solution archéologique satisfaisante.”

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The names for "wrasse" *Labrus bergylta*

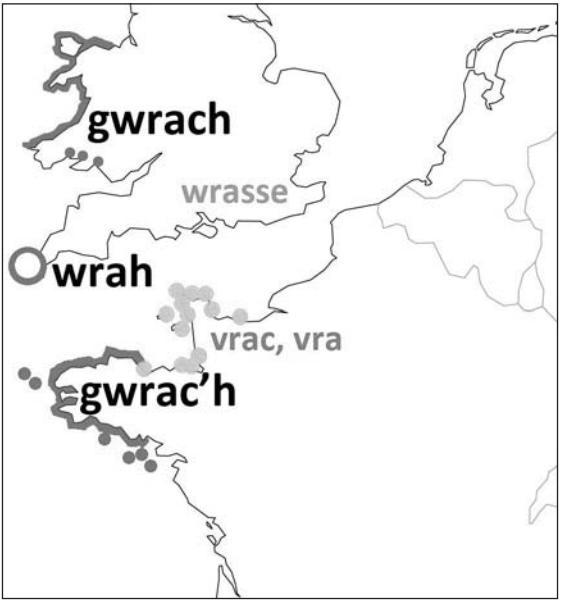

Figure 1: map "wrasse" (Ichtyo 266, ALECM 95, GCSW, OED, GPC).

Figure 1 is a very clear demonstration of linguistic concordance in the Atlantic area between the Celtic, English and Romance names of the wrasse, *Labrus bergylta*. On both sides of the Channel, one can first notice the Celtic names: B. *gwrac'h*, W. *gwrach* and in the English dialect of Cornwall *wrah* coming from C. *gwragh* which is not used anymore. The Celtic names explained the etymology of their English and Gallo-Romance equivalents: E. *wrasse*, and the G.-Rom. forms *vrac, vra* collected in Normandy and in eastern Brittany.

The absence of initial [g-] in the English and Gallo-Romance names may probably be accounted for by a survival of the Celtic feminine term in its lenited form: when placed after an article the consonant group [gw-] becomes [w-]. This obviously explains the Romance variants *vra*, *vras*, *vrac* or E. *wrasse*. In the English dialect of Cornwall, Morton Nance collected *wrah* and *wraagh* in Mousehole and the Isles of Scilly, in Penberth, *wrath*. According to this author, the phonetic variation of the Cornish language

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allows for forms such as *rath* or *raa* where initial [gwr-] is literally reduced to [r-]. The final consonant may also be dropped (Morton Nance, 1963).

Before being applied to a species of fish, W. *gwrach* and B. *gwrac'h* colloquially mean 'hag' or 'witch'. In their comments on the names of the witch in Europe, Caprini and Alinei (2007) note that in Celtic the colloquial term only refers to the semantic field of 'hag' as well as to "witch / sorceress' in a derogatory sense.

In southern Europe, particularly in Italy and in the Iberian peninsula, Galic. *meiga* or It. *strega* still clearly refer to the magic and the religious fields. One also finds a reference to the "mother goddess" in the Slavic or Finnish dialects. Referring to Propp, Caprini and Alinei explain the restriction of the Celtic semantic field by a consequence of the witchcraft trials carried out in an intense and repeated manner in these regions of Western Europe from the 14th to the 17th centuries. Caprini and Alinei also remind that according to the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Institor – Sprenger, 1487) a 'witch' is a woman who

1. has a pact with the devil and fornicates with him (especially during the Sabbath).
2. is heretical
3. Practises harmful witchcraft
4. flies through the air often transformed into animals.

It is not difficult to understand that the magical aspect of the witch had been eliminated and disappeared in that context.

However, the magico-religious trait seems to have survived in the Celtic names of the wrasse. In fact, the sea-side Celtic speakers used to believe that fish to have supernatural abilities. Several Celtic tales relate the prodigious actions of the wrasse which appears to be endowed with a magical power that allows it to reign over all the other marine animals of the rocky area where it lives. (Sébillot 1882). Indeed, the wrasse is sometimes also called *rock-fish* on the British coast. And in Scottish Gaelic, *creagag* "wrasse" means litteraly "rocky" from G. *creag* "rock" (Ó Baoill, 1994).

Called "old-wife" in Scotland (HSD) and I. *máthair na mballach* "mother of the wrasse / sea-wife" (Dinneen, 1904), the names of the wrasse reveal a motivational process indicating a totemic system of beliefs already noticed by Francesco Benozzo in the Celtic names of the whale (2012). According to Propp (1983), the oldest forms of the "witch" type referred in the neutral sense to an omnipotent being, endowed with the traits of a female relative derived from that of the mother-goddess. The

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significant presence of the "old woman" in the various European dialects and oral traditions and its innumerable connections with natural phenomena of all kinds seem to confirm this thesis.

That group of fish names present many similarities with Sedna, a goddess sea-wife in the Inuit mythology (Laugrand & Oosten, 2010). The Inuit's way of life used to be based on fishing and hunting up to the middle of the 20th century. This notion of supernatural power providing game and fish is based on an animist conception of the world that endows supernatural entities with a form of subjectivity. In particular, one can agree with the minds of game species to be allowed to hunt. For the Inuit, Sedna does not remain for a long period in a natural cave but, according to the Inuktitut language, the word Sedna would have been derived from the term *sanna* « thereunder » offering another relevant semantic association with the Celtic names of the wrasse.

The names for "nose"

In the Gaelic linguistic atlas of Scotland (figure 2), we find *sròn* and its *stròn* and *sdròn* variants. The Gaelic area of *stròn* corresponds evidently to the southern Irish area of *srón*, to the Welsh area of *trwyn* "nose"/ *ffroen* "nostril" and the Breton *fron* "nostril" area, with an *sr-* / *fr-* alternation (sibilant-liquid / spirant-liquid) which is common in the concordances between Gaelic and Gallo-Brittonic.

These words correspond to the Gallo-romance dialect form *frogno* "snout" probably coming from a Gaulish **frogna*/**srogna*. Fr. *se renfrogner* "to frown, to scowl", *mine renfrognée* "frowning face" are of course derivatives from that Celtic lexical group. We can recall as well the E. *to frown*. Let us also mention the Occitan and Italo-Roman *trugno* used to designate an unhappy, defeated face: occ. *fa la trougna* "to pout, to look sulky". Obviously cognate of Fr. *trogne*: a familiar term for "mug, grotesque or also pleasant face" (Delamarre, 2003; FEW XIII-2, 332).

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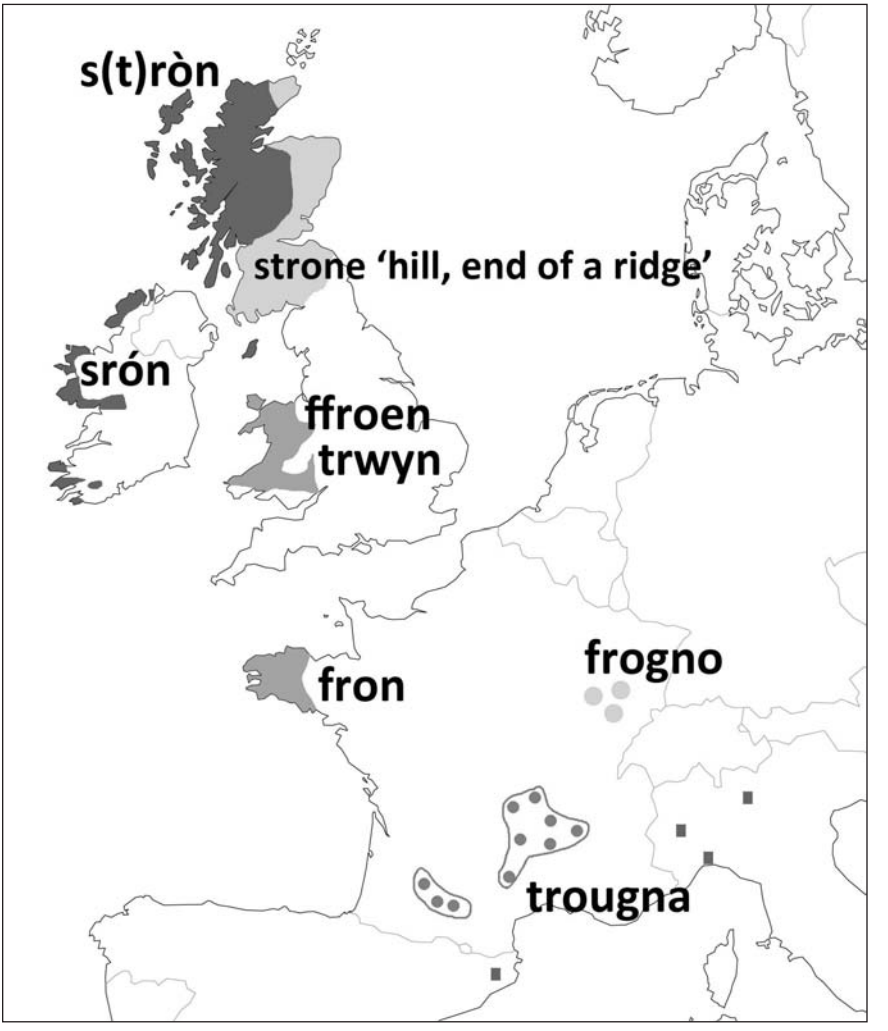

Figure 2: map "nose" (SGDS 800, LASID 428, DSL, WDS-LGW, DBC, ALF 1859, ALLo 657, ALG 596, FEW XIII-2 332).

In Scots dialects and in Scottish toponymy, *strone* refers also to "hill, headland, cape". In fact, the terms *stron, sron, ffroen, fron, frogne, trwyn, trogne* would be nothing else than the projected diversification of the referent "nose, nostril, muzzle/snout."

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The names for "alder", *Alnus glutinosa*

On figure 3, the Gaelic area *feàrna* corresponds to the Irish *fearn* and to their Welsh and Breton equivalent *gwern*. In gallo-romance (oïl and oc areas) the term *vèrnhe*, descended from the Gaulish word *uerna* are still in use in a wide southern area of France. The Celtic lexical continuity is maintained in north-western Italy and Catalonia by the respective It. *vèrna* and Cat. *vern*. The similarity to the previous *sròn* / *fron* map is striking, including in this case a higher density of Celtic variants in southern Gaul, Catalonia and Italy. Let us recall that the Celtic *gwern*, *vern* also refers to a marsh, the mast of a boat, as well as to a rudder. It used to be also the case in Cornish.

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Figure 3: map "alder" (eDIL, AFB, WDS-GPC, DBC, ALF 74, AIS 583, ALDC 1202).

It would also be necessary to reconcile these data with the French place-names derivating from Gaul. *uerna* which gave the numerous Verneuil, Verneil, Vernou (**uerno-ialon*) 'alder clearing', Vernais, Vernet, Verneix.

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The names for "sloe", *Prunus spinose*

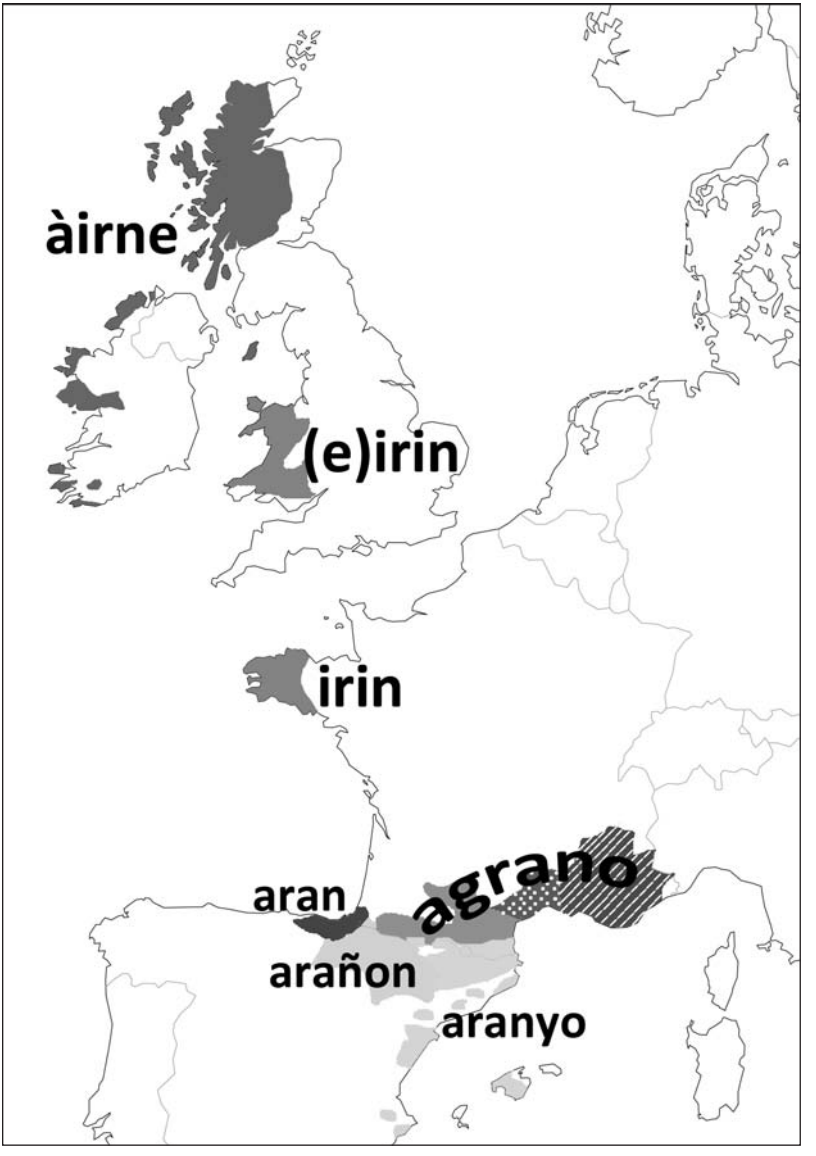

Figure 4: map "sloe" (eDil, AFB, LGW84, ALE I.63, DBC, Thésoc, EHHA 537, ALANR III.37I, ALCL II.403, ALC I.337, ALDC 1207).

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The configuration of figure 4 calls back the previous one. B. *irin* is a cognate of W. *eirin* and G. *àirne*. The distribution of the cognate Romance variants extends here again over much of the gallo-romance area, Aragon and Catalonia, this time including the Basque-speaking zone.

The names for "sedge"

On figure 5, according to the Celtic alternation s-/h- (I. *seileach* / B. *haleg* 'willow', I. *salann* / B. *holenn* 'salt', I. *súil* 'eye'/ B. *heol* 'sun'), the distribution of the names of the sedge offers a lexical map that seems to testify to a very old implantation. The use of this plant was already attested in braiding techniques during the Upper Palaeolithic (Hurcombe, 2014). The extension of the variants is roughly identical to that of the maps already studied. In Italy the *esca* form is still used along the Po and the Adige rivers. The *sisca* area extends to the south of Spain.

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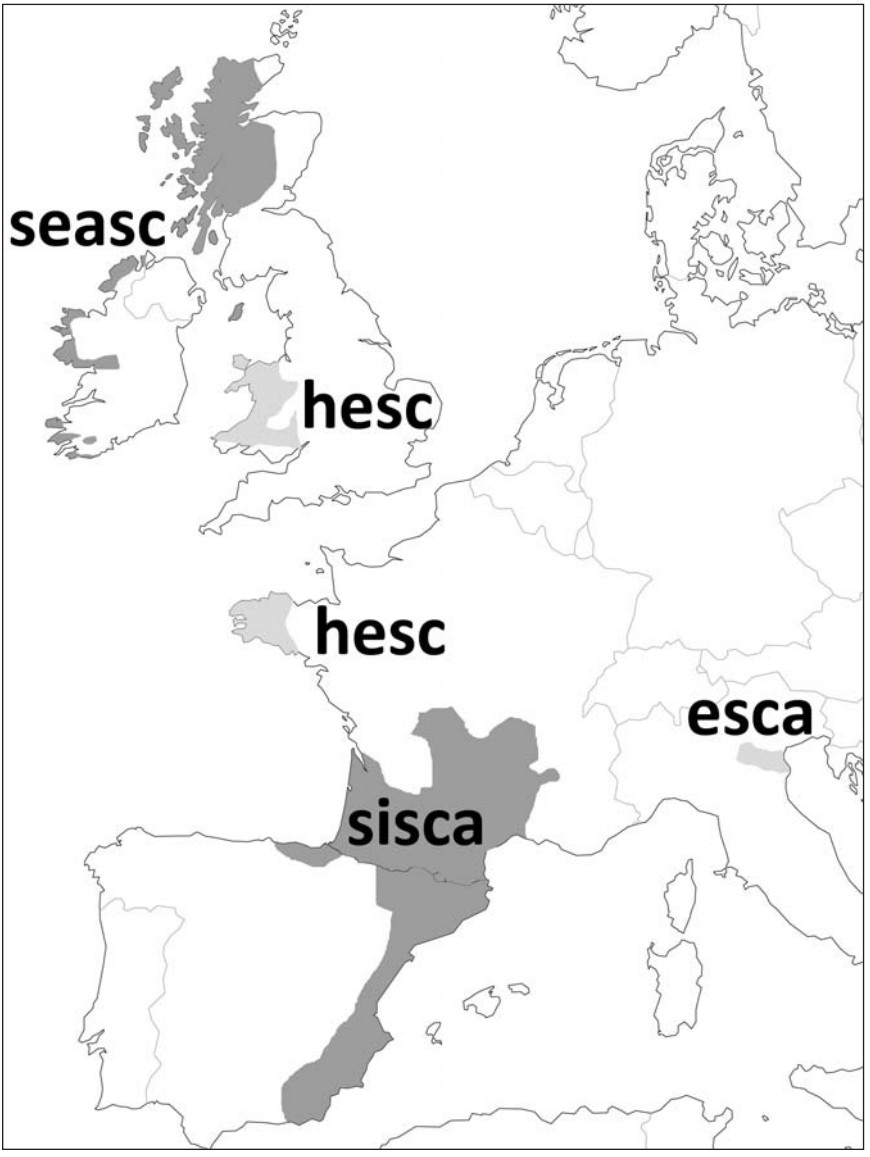

Figure 5: map “sedge” (eDil, AFB, GPC-WDS, DBC, Thesoc, FEW XI 551, epA 2013).

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The names for "sieve/ riddle"

Figure 6: map "sieve, riddle" (eDIL, AFB, WDS-GPC, DBC, FEW II 1335–1336).

The Celtic cognates of "sieve" are I. and G. *criathar*, W. *crwydr* and B. *krouer*. The Gal.-Rom *crinse*, *criente* do not properly mean 'sieve', but 'sieve residue' resulting from the action of sieving. In ancient Gaul,

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crinse, criente mostly extend towards the northern Gallo-Romance area, encompassing Normandy devoid of occurrences of that type.

The words for "hiding place / to hide"

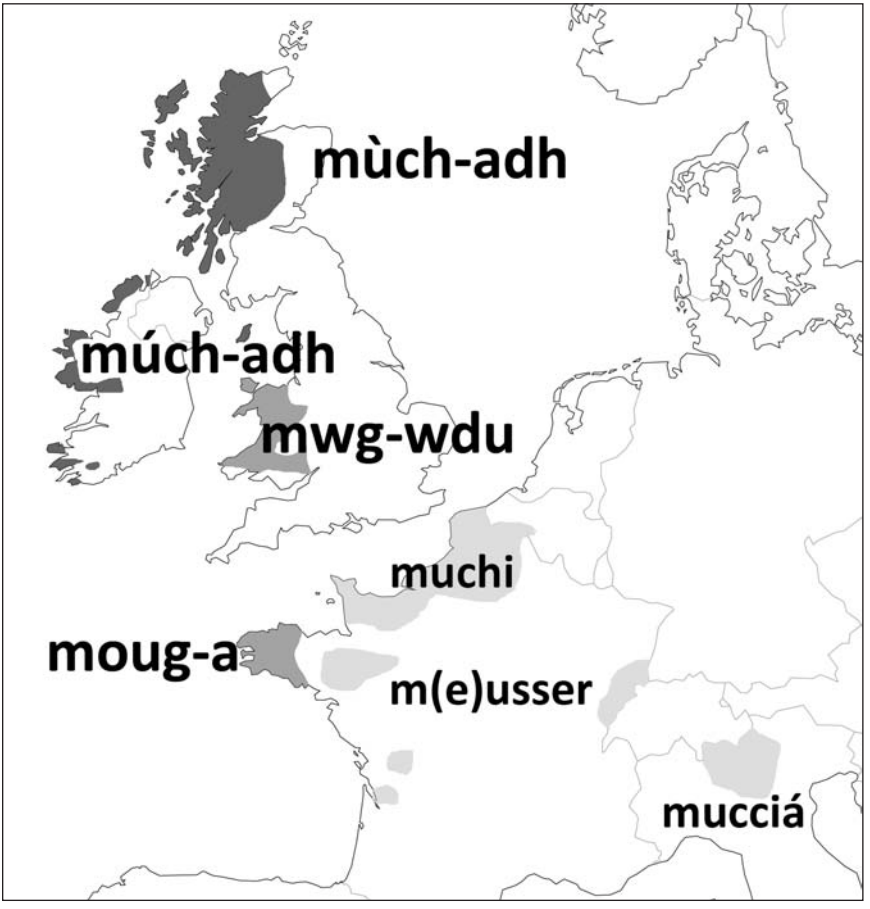

Figure 7: map "hiding-place / to hide" (eDIL, AFB, GPC, DBC, ALF 191, FEW VI-3 193–197).

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The Romance forms Oïl. *muchi*, *meusser*, It. *mucciá* mean 'to hide' (FEW VI-3,197) (ALF 191). All these Romance verbs are of Celtic origin (Thurneysen, 1884). They are related to the variants I. *múch*, W. *mwg*, B. *moug* "smoke, suffocation, trouble, cover, hiding-place" and the corresponding verbs I. *múch*, W. *mwgwdu*, B. *mougañ* 'to suffocate, to cover, to hide'. On the map ALF 191 "hide", the largely predominant form along the Channel is Oïl *muchi*. In Northern Cotentin, there is also *muchyi*. The Oïl *muchi* seems to correspond to I. *múch* [mu:x]; the *múchadh* verbal name pronounced [mu:xə] in Connemara and Munster becomes [mu:xu], [my:ɣu] and sometimes [my:hu] in Ulster where the interconsonantic vowel of the radical tends to become anterior from [u] to [y]. The intervocalic [x] becomes [ɣ] and sometimes [h]. In a Gallo-Romance context the oil forms of *muchi* develop variants such as *mussi*, *meusser*.

Conclusion

This analysis shows some figures that demonstrate remarkable geolinguistic concordances in the Celto-atlantic area. In order to move beyond the dead-end in which classical philology and Indo-European theory has brought us, it is now important to study a linguistic area by considering the exchanges it may have had on the long term with its neighbouring linguistic territories. Taking into account the last results reached in the fields of archæology, prehistory and ethnology, this kind of research presents all the opportunities to be innovative and to help us to better understand the continuity of languages and populations in the Atlantic zone.

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