

# Regional Languages in France: The Case of Breton

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## 1 Introduction

Since the days of the French Revolution the shared language has been an essential element in the national identity of France. Considered a central expression of the equality and unity of the French people, the language has since then been fiercely defended against any perceived threat or potential corruption. While the measures taken to protect French against the influx of foreign — i.e. for the most part English — words are widely known, the impact this language policy has on the approximately one dozen other indigenous languages spoken in France is often overlooked.

Breton, which belongs to the Celtic language family, is one of those regional languages. It is spoken in the Northwestern part of France in an area generally called Bretagne (Brittany). The struggle of the Breton to preserve their language and identity despite the longstanding strong influence of French and the extremely restrictive language policy of the French government, are typical of the problems faced by the other minority languages in France.

In my paper, I would like to examine some aspects of the relationship between Breton and French and its historical development. Since the majority of the people active in the movement to preserve and promote Breton today base the definition of the Breton identity on the historical era when Brittany was a duchy, I will begin with a brief outline of the most significant events of that period. Subsequently, I will look at the evolution of post-Revolutionary French language policy with respect to the status of Breton. The last part of my paper will cover the development of the Breton-French relationship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This section will consider changes within the Breton movement during that time, changes in legislation — the Loi Deixonne and the Cultural Charter — as well as some of the contradictions in the French government's position on minority languages. A brief look at Diwan, an organization that runs several Breton immersion schools, will conclude the section.

The objective of my paper is twofold. First of all, I would like to outline the complex interrelationship of language and social identity. At the same time I aim to indicate some of the inconsistencies in the French government's position on minority languages in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neither aspect can or should be perceived as an exclusively 'French problem.' At a time when ethnic minorities all over the world increasingly claim the respect and due protection of their culture and language, the complex relationship between Breton and French is rather to be seen as one example of a general phenomenon.

## 2 Breton and Brittany

According to Diwan<sup>1</sup> there are about 400,000 speakers of Breton at present. Of the 9 areas into which Brittany was once divided, only the 5 located in Basse Bretagne (Lower Brittany) were Breton speaking. Each of the five *évêchés* (or bishoprics) — Cornouaille, Vannetais, Leon, and Tregor — possessed its own dialect, and not all dialects were mutually intelligible. At present the area of historical Brittany consists of 5 departments, 4 of which (Morbihan, Cotes d'Armor,

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.diwanbreizh.org/sections.php4?op=viewarticle&artid=23>

Finistere, Ille-et-Villaine) make up the administrative region Bretagne, while the department Loire-Atlantique belongs to the region Pays de la Loire.

There are two different spelling systems for Breton. The more dominant one, referred to as KLTG, is an interdialectal orthography based on the Breton dialects Kerne (Cornouaille=K), Leon (=L), Tregor (Tregor=T), and Gwened (Vannes=G).

### 3 Outline of the history of Brittany<sup>2</sup>

Before the arrival of the Romans, Brittany — referred to as Armorica in texts of the period — was inhabited by several celtophonic tribes. The Roman settlement of the area, which began in 56 BC, pushed the Celtic language into the Western part of the region. The introduction of Latin in the Eastern part of Armorica is generally regarded as the beginning of Gallo. In the late 5<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> century more Celtic-speaking peoples arrived in Armorica from Southern Britain. These peoples were fleeing from a Scottish invasion and settled in the Western and Northern parts of the region. The majority of the groups apparently came from Wales, and it is generally believed that these migrations are the reason for the close similarities between Breton, Welsh, and Cornish. Since the new arrivals did not settle in the Eastern Armorica, two distinct Armoricas emerged from this period: one Breton and one Roman, specifically Merovingian (after the 6<sup>th</sup> century). Gallo-Frankish Armorica consisted of the dioceses of Vannes, Nantes, and Rennes, and was grouped into smaller and larger urban centers. Breton Armorica consisted of small communities and parishes, which formed several large and competing federations. In the early 9<sup>th</sup> century Nominoé, a Breton loyal to the Frankish king Louis the Pious, became the leader of these federations. When upon the death of Louis one of Louis' brothers invaded Brittany in 845, Nominoé defeated him and established Brittany as a virtually independent duchy loyal to the Frankish crown. In 851 Nominoé's son Erispoé managed to add the *comtés* (the secular equivalent of the dioceses) of Rennes, Nantes, and the pays of Retz to the duchy.

The Norman invasions of Brittany, which began in 907, ended with the decisive victory of Alan al Louarn (also known as Alain Barbetorte) at Nantes in 937. During his reign, Brittany was reestablished as an independent but loyal duchy within the territorial boundaries of 851. The loyalty to the French crown remained unaltered until the Hundred Years' War, during which Brittany shifted its allegiance back and forth, striving to become even less dependent on France. Brittany established its own Court, an administrative system comprised of a Council and the Etats, and began coining its own money. After losing several battles against the French, Duke François II was forced to sign the Treaty of Verger in 1488; any marriage in the ducal family now required the consent of the French crown. Invoking the treaty, Charles VIII forced François's oldest daughter Anne to marry him in 1491. In her marriages to him and to Louis XII in 1499, Anne tried to salvage as much independence as she could. When her daughter Claude was wed to François I in 1514, she continued her mother's efforts. The Edict of Union and the Edict of Plessis-Macé were signed in 1532, which made Brittany a province of France, while giving it considerably more privileges than most of the other provinces had at the time, such as near-total fiscal, judicial, and ecclesiastical freedom. It was furthermore guaranteed that all taxes levied in Brittany, as well as any change in the status of Brittany required the consent of the Etats. Soon a governor and a Parliament of Brittany — half of the representatives being chosen by the French crown — were established. Repeated attempts by the French crown to diminish the influence of the Etats, as well as continuous disagreement over the scope of parliamentary powers lead to repeated violent upheavals against the French king and his representatives and fed the desire to reestablish Brittany as an independent duchy.

Some Bretons initially considered the Revolution an opportunity to advance their plans for independence. When the revolutionary reforms failed to bring this objective about and furthermore infringed on the privileges and practices of Brittany even more than the monarchy

<sup>2</sup>Unless indicated otherwise, the following account is condensed from O'Callaghan (1983: 6-32).

had, a strong counter-revolutionary sentiment arose. This current found its expression to a large extent in the *chouannerie*, which was at the same time a religious movement, a royalist political movement, and a Breton political movement. The *chouannerie* first broke out in 1793, and was fueled just as much by the desire for independence as by the resentment of the revolutionaries' anti-clerical attitude, and the hatred of the impending compulsory military service and the new financial policy. The revolutionary government reacted with repression and persecution of the movement's leaders, yet until the middle of the 19th century, any action perceived as a potential threat to Brittany brought about a new episode of the *chouannerie*'s guerilla warfare in the region. It is interesting to note that the *chouannerie* was never linguistically motivated. The *chouans* were not against French, in fact the leaders of the movement were mostly French speaking. (Cf. McDonald 1989: 30)

In September 1790 the parliament of Brittany was suppressed and replaced by a *court provisoire*. Thus, the Etats never met to discuss the abolition of Brittany's privileges, which had been offered by the Breton delegates at the *Etats Généraux* in 1789 pending the Etats' approval. This was technically an illegal act, as were all administrative restructurings, such as the division of Brittany into 5 departments in 1789 and the formation of an administrative region Bretagne, made official in 1972.

## 4 Breton during and after the French Revolution

While the history of the Breton language is certainly connected to the history of Brittany — not to mention the central importance that Breton has in defining the modern-day Breton identity — it is important to see the two as separate, if intertwined, developments. One reason for this is that, as we have seen, a large region of Brittany has always been non-Breton-speaking. But even within Basse Bretagne a sociolinguistic division can be observed. As early as the 10th century, many of the educated and the nobility in both Upper and Lower Brittany spoke not only Latin, but also some form of French. By the time Brittany became a province of France, French had already been the language of nobility for several centuries. The first Breton dictionary, the *Catholicon* published in 1499, was a trilingual document listing French and Latin translations of Breton phrases. The *Catholicon* quickly became a popular reference for Breton-speaking Bretons with educational or commercial ambitions (cf. McDonald 1989: 28). The wealthy and the nobility hired tutors to for their children. By the 17th century, elementary schools (*petits écoles*) organized by the clergy were also prospering. While these schools generally charged for their services, too, they were in principle free for the poor, although it is not clear whether any significant sections of the peasant population actually benefited from them. The teaching of the *petits écoles* apparently consisted largely of Catholic doctrine and some rudiments of Latin. Higher education was only available to the wealthy, and was firmly associated with Latin and French. Breton had a place in the religious education for the upper classes, too, but often only in oral recital. Instruction in reading on the other hand, always began with Latin and then moved on to French; reading Breton was dealt with last, if at all.

Virtually nothing of this system survived the Revolutionary legislation, aimed to a large extent at doing away with the institutions and practices of the Ancien Regime. Everyone was to be turned into a 'citizen' fully educated in the Republican ideals. Legislation passed in the fall of 1793 stated that in order for the new citizen's rights to become general knowledge, all children would need to

“learn to speak, read and write the French language.’ Additional decrees (...) barred nobles and ecclesiastics from teaching, and stated that public education everywhere was to be conducted such that ‘one of its prime benefits be that the French language become, in a short space of time, the language familiar to all parts of the Republic’ (...) Moreover, ‘in all parts of the Republic instruction is to be given in French only’” (McDonald 1989: 27f).

The only aspect even partially compatible with this new system was the idea of using Breton as a teaching aid in the instruction of French, which had arisen in the area around Leon just before the Revolution. This concept aimed to ease the instruction of the new (French) with the help of the familiar (the Breton acquired at home), and was further legitimized by the law of 27 brumaire an III (17 November 1794), which phrased the issue of the language of instruction slightly differently: “education will be given in French’, and ‘the local idiom can only be used as an auxiliary means” (McDonald 1989: 29).

The somewhat lenient attitude towards the local idioms is also reflected in the decree of the National Assembly of 1790 to have all of its texts translated into the regional languages. Although the decree was duly carried out, it proved difficult to find enough people who had a sufficient command of written Breton. Later on however only anti-Revolution pamphlets were written in Breton. After 1793 no more official texts were written in Breton, the new Republicans were against it.

A nationwide investigation into the idioms of France launched in 1790 revealed that only one-fifth of the population could actually speak French, less than 2/3 understood it, and more than one-third did not know French at all (McDonald 1989: 29). The sustained insurrection in Brittany after 1792 (see above) caused the new regime to associate Brittany and Breton with reactionary and counter-revolutionary forces. Unsurprisingly, a report on ‘Foreign idioms and the teaching of the French language’ presented to the Committee of Public Safety in 1794 states

“the idiom known as bas-breton, and the Basque idiom and the German and Italian languages have perpetuated the reign of fanaticism and superstition, and assured the domination of priests and nobles (...) [they have] prevented the revolution from penetrating into nine large departemens [sic], and can favor the enemies of France” (McDonald 1989: 32).

The report observes that in Brittany

“ignorance perpetuates the yoke imposed by the priests and nobles; there citizens are born and die in error: they do not even know yet that new laws exist. The inhabitants of the countryside only understand Breton: it is with this barbaric instrument of their superstitious ideas that the priests and the intransigents hold them under their sway, direct their conscience, and prevent citizens from knowing the laws and from loving the Republic” (McDonald 1989: 32).

One of the initial reactions to these findings was the establishment of ‘French language teachers’ in Brittany and in areas perceived as having a ‘foreign link,’ such as the Rhine and the Catalan regions and Corsica. These teachers were to receive a state-financed, fixed salary, and to instruct the general public in French and *civisme*, or Republican citizenship, free of charge. Due to financial difficulties, the number of non-paying students soon had to be limited to one quarter of a class, and when towards the end of the Revolutionary period, the notion of a fixed salary was abolished for similar reasons, many teachers could no longer support themselves and gave up. (McDonald 1989: 33)

During the Consulate and the First Empire, the secondary education became a focus of interest for lawmakers, since the new bureaucracy was in dire need of well educated civil servants. The first *lycées* were created, where grammar, mathematics, and (secular) Latin dominated the syllabi and French was the exclusive language of instruction. Primary education meanwhile was largely neglected. A law of 1802 tried to make the local communes responsible for financing elementary schools in their districts, though most cities could not afford to do this. While in the Finistère combined efforts of the bishop and the prefect — one seeking to increase recruitment to the clergy, the other looking for qualified administrators — boosted the number of both elementary and secondary schools to one of the highest in Brittany, the qualification of the

instructors in rural areas remained largely insufficient and the content of the instruction was often still restricted to religious education in Breton.

While Catholic catechism was once more tolerated as a school subject during and after the Napoleonic era, legislation was unclear as what place it should occupy in the general syllabus (cf. McDonald 1989: 38f). Thus, responding to complaints from local Breton Republicans about teachers using exclusively Breton texts, the Prefect of Finistère merely suggested the use of bilingual catechisms to the bishop. The Prefect pointed out that translated editions could help the students acquire French, and that similar bilingual catechisms had already been issued for the Walloons in Northeastern France. The bishop flatly refused, stating that religious instruction in the ‘familiar’ language was one of the main factors attracting students, and that furthermore the fact that not even a unified edition for the four Breton dialects could be realized prohibited any attempt at compiling a French-Breton edition (McDonald 1989: 39). All over Brittany, the battle lines were being drawn this way.

In the meantime the Education Committee for the arrondissement of Brest voted in 1836 that the use of Breton would henceforth be forbidden in their local public schools. It would be several decades before the same drastic decisions would be taken on the national level. The earliest report of a later on widespread practice for teaching French also comes from the Brest area. In 1833, an Inspector described a pedagogical method that involved

“the children watching each other for a word of Breton. Anyone who inadvertently uttered a word of Breton had to hold ‘quite a heavy piece of wood (...) and cannot take part in the games until he has heard one of his friends speaking Breton.’ The piece of wood was then passed on to the next child caught in the act, and so on” (McDonald 1989: 47).

This device, which is now generally known as the *symbole*, apparently was never the subject of any official directive and generally not well-regarded in official circles. Nonetheless, it persisted as a teaching method for several decades.

Nationwide, significant changes started in the early 1880’s, when Jules Ferry became Minister of Education. Legislation passed during his term instituted the *école laïque* to provide free, compulsory, secular (and, ideally, politically neutral) education, and sought to resolve the conflict with the clergy by banning all religious education from the schools. Further legislation later in the same decade made French the exclusive language of instruction in all schools. In 1889, a General Inspector named Carré, who had been sent to Brittany to help implement the new laws on education, proposed a new, progressive approach to teaching French from the beginning of formal instruction, which today might be called the ‘direct method.’ The arguments he used to defend the exclusion of Breton from the manner of instruction he proposed reflect the views of Breton with respect to education held at the time. Teaching solely in Breton would amount to abandoning the national language in Brittany, and the mere fact that Breton had at least 4 different dialects — some Bretons argued that Breton had as many dialects as it had communes (cf. McDonald 1989: 45) — made uniform bilingual education impossible. Furthermore, he considered Breton unfit for schooling because it was chaotic, possessing no written grammar, and offered no possibility of external, scholarly relations. Carré cited reports which described Breton children as neglected, insufficiently clothed and fed, and in essence intellectually retarded, with a vocabulary of no more than 500 words at school age. Breton was thus a primitive language, which could not compete with French, and the amount of Breton a child knew when entering school not to be overestimated when assessing the language as an educational tool. According to Carré, Breton was at the most to be used in easing the acquisition of basic vocabulary in the initial stages and only in “a restricted and well determined way” (McDonald 1989: 49). The use of Breton by children in the playground should be permitted since they would otherwise tire too

quickly. While Carré's new method in principle abolished the symbole, the use of this device apparently persisted in some regions.<sup>3</sup>

## 5 Developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

### 5.1 The Breton Movement: First and Second *Emsav*

One of the difficulties in research on Breton and the 'Breton movement' is that the term has no clear-cut definition and thus may vary in meaning from one author to another. It is sometimes used to "describe a wide range of cultural, linguistic, economic, and political activities in Brittany and applied to an ever-changing array of societies and groups, united only by a common commitment to some aspect of Breton language, culture or politics" (McDonald 1989: 73). As a self-ascription, it is usually limited to groups fighting for a 'Breton world,' in which the Breton language is of central importance. The nomenclature commonly found in French is more telling. While *le mouvement breton* is used by the general public and by members of this self-defining movement speaking to 'outsiders,' *emsav*<sup>4</sup> is preferred within the movement. The term *emsav* is virtually unknown outside the movement and often has definite historical or political semantics, especially when used in French. Following movement's nomenclature, members of the *Emsav* are referred to as militants (*les militants*, French; *an emsaverien* or *ar stourmerien*, Breton) by most authors; the term 'activist' is dispreferred by certain militants due to its "pejorative connotations, suggesting, for example, mindless bomb-throwing" (McDonald 1989: 74).

Breton militants distinguish three periods of their movement, which are also called *emsavs*: the period of the first *emsav* before World War I, the second *emsav* from 1919 to 1945, and the contemporary period called the third *emsav*.<sup>5</sup> The three *emsavs* differed significantly in scope and objectives. The first *emsav* arose primarily as a reaction to the perceived threat of the legislation of the 1870's to Breton, and to the strong waves of emigration from rural, underdeveloped Brittany to the more industrialized regions of France. Alarmed by statements such as the address of the sous-prefet of Morlaix to teachers, "Surtout, rappelez-vous messieurs, que vous n'êtes établis que pour tuer la langue bretonne" [Most of all, gentlemen, remember that you are installed only to kill the Breton language] (Lebesque 1970: 97), members of the first *emsav* strove to emphasize linguistic distinctiveness and to preserve the region's character and traditions. The necessity for all French to unite in the face of the enemy brought an end to the activities of the first *emsav*. After the experiences of World War I, where a lot of the movement's leaders died, a new *emsav* emerged. A new generation of militants gave the movement in general a nationalist orientation, while internal quarrels over the exact goals caused several internal splits in the groups of the *emsav*, creating an almost unfathomable number of organizations, some of which continued to pursue regionalist goals. The plans announced by the Vichy regime to reestablish the traditional provinces of France, gave the militants new hope of achieving their goals. When the results fell short of their expectations, certain members of the *emsav*'s extreme groups collaborated with the German to the extent of forming a Breton military unit. Several of these militants were killed by the Resistance and the resentment felt towards their actions was extended towards the entire spectrum of the *emsav*. After the Liberation, the political and social repercussions were harsh and effectively ended the second *emsav*.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>McDonald (1989: 76) points out that a 2 or 3 schools made use of the symbol in the late 1960's and early 1970.

<sup>4</sup>Breton: 'uprising, revolt, movement'; neologism originally derived from Breton *em sevel* 'to stand up' (McDonald 1989: 73).

<sup>5</sup>Unless indicated otherwise, the following synopsis is condensed from O'Callaghan (1983: 39-76).

<sup>6</sup>The movement became active again a few years later, partially in response to the legislation outlined in the next section, and gained momentum in and after 1968. This period (which still continues today) is known among militants as the third *emsav*.

## 5.2 The Loi Deixonne and the Cultural Charter

On January 11 1951 the Loi Deixonne was passed, which aimed to “favoriser l’étude des langues et dialects locaux dans les régions où ils sont en usage” [favor the instruction of the local languages and dialects in the regions where they are spoken] (O’Callaghan 1983: 97) and applied to four languages: Breton, Basque, Catalan, and Occitan. Corsican was added in 1974. The Loi Deixonne was reaffirmed by legislation in 1975 that declared that instruction in the regional languages and cultures may be offered at all levels of schooling. Since 1951 a variety of additional documents have extended and defined the scope of the Loi Deixonne, which now applies to the teaching of regional cultures in all of France and not just in the areas that possess a dialect. Furthermore, it has been specified that wherever different dialects of a language exist, teaching of the language should be based on the local dialect and spelling, even though, as O’Callaghan observes, this may arguably lead to linguistic disunity (O’Callaghan 1983: 97n). In primary education, one hour a week can be devoted to the teaching of a regional languages, within a pre-specified area of the syllabus, provided there is a demand expressed by the parents concerned and the class has been approved the Inspector d’Académie. Assuming a certain demand and sufficient resources, one hour of regional language instruction may also be offered at the beginning of secondary education. Later on, this kind of instruction may occupy a maximum of three hours per week, if the class consists of at least ten students. After 1970 regional languages could form an optional paper in the baccalaureat — although only marks above 10 were included in the diploma — and become the second language in a modern language degree program.

In 1978 a unique ‘Cultural Charter’ for Brittany was signed. Aside from creating new cultural and administrative agencies and giving regional TV and radio broadcasts more airtime (until that time the broadcasts were sparse and seldom longer than a few minutes), the charter created a separate Breton language option from 8th grade to the baccalaureat and improved the training standards for teachers of Breton. This aspect was to become effective at the *rentrée* (i.e. the beginning of the winter semester) 1979. Contrary to the lawmakers’ expectations however, the number of high school students enrolled in any kind of Breton classes dropped almost 50% at the *collège* level and 20% at the *lycée* level (cf. McDonald 1989: 62). As McDonald points out, one of the reasons for this was probably that the schools received the information about the new language option or too late to make arrangements for the upcoming school year. Another reason was the strange circumstance that while the new charter was meant to increase the demand for Breton teachers, there still was no possibility to major in Breton, and the Minister of Universities had not signed the charter; full-time Breton teachers were thus not available.<sup>7</sup> As McDonald determined, however, neither circumstance may have been the main factor causing the demand for Breton to drop in such a way. In the eyes of many students, the new option had not only devalidated the old (and still available) voluntary courses, but transformed Breton in school from an “interesting extra” into a regular course; and following the age-old student logic that school and fun are mutually exclusive, the once fun subject was now regarded as work. (McDonald 1989: 66)

## 5.3 Contradictions in the Government Approach to Minority Languages

Although the Loi Deixonne certainly seems a turning point in the French lawmakers approach to minority languages, this did not put an end to government representatives’ hostile comments regarding the status of regional languages. In March 1960 Michel Debré said in Rennes that “il n’y a pas pour la France de politique bretonne, il y a une politique française en Bretagne” [For France, there is no Breton policy, there is only a French policy in Brittany] (Mordrel 1973: 460),

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<sup>7</sup>Since the publication of McDonald (1989) — which is the most recent comprehensive analysis I could locate — the status of Breton has improved in this regard, as well. However, I was unable to find any indication of exactly when (or why) this change came about.

three months later the Debré decree created the administrative region Bretagne, excluding the (industrially relatively prosperous) department Loire-Atlantique.

While the French government thus opposed attempts to express a regional identity in their own country, they openly supported some aspiration towards independence abroad. The contrast between the comments mentioned above and the remark Charles de Gaulle made during his visit to Canada in 1967 “Vive le Québec libre” could not be greater. The reactions this statement caused among the Breton militants — and in other regional movements — is well summarized by Lebesque:

“Grand dieux. Ce livre n’aurait aucune raison d’être si les Bretons possédaient le statut que le colon anglais concède aux Québécois: gouvernement autonome, Assemblée élue, enseignement obligatoire de la langue nationale.” [Great gods. This book would have no reason for being if the Bretons had the status that the English colony concedes to the Québécois: autonomous government, and elected assembly, obligatory teaching of the national language. – ed.] (Lebesque 1970: 194)

As O’Callaghan (1983: 94n) points out, Algeria gaining independence quite likely was another factor agitating the regionalists. Breton militants saw themselves in a colonial situation and being an ethnic entity, two strong similarities to Algeria that they persistently pointed out both to government representatives and to the *emsav*’s members and recruits.<sup>8</sup>

This contradictory stance of the French government continued throughout the 1970’s. Despite several proposals in favor of increased regional autonomy, and repeated official statements in support of such changes, the development towards more centralization was ultimately upheld. Meanwhile the Prime Minister of Quebec and leader of the separatist party received a warm welcome during his visit to France in 1977, and was almost treated like a head of state; he was awarded the Grand-Croix de la Legion d’Honneur and given every reassurance that France would support Quebec whichever course it should chose to take. (O’Callaghan 1983: 103)

Since then the French government seems to have become somewhat more supportive of regional languages within its own territory, which in the case of Breton can be concluded from the fact that Breton language and literature can now be studied at virtually all universities in the region, albeit not to the same extent at all schools. However, the way the French government has dealt with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages<sup>9</sup> clearly indicates that France still has a long way to go before its minority languages will have a clear and secure legal status. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was passed by the European Council in 1992. While most EU countries ratified the Charter within a relatively short amount of time, France refused to sign it. The same year, the French Constitution was amended and the sentence “La langue de la République est le français” is added to Article II. During the summer of 1998, a commission was set up to assess the current policies regarding minority languages in France and to propose guidelines for future policy making. The commission’s final report, which was submitted to French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in July 1998, stressed that the place given to minority languages in France should illustrate, accompany, and support the goals France pursued on the international level, i.e. a focus on “Europe, decentralization, *francophonie*, and multilingualism”<sup>10</sup>. Jospin subsequently affirmed that France was still very interested in ratifying the Charter and announced he would sign it on May 7, 1998. On that date, Jospin did sign the Charter, yet on May 6 the French president Jacques Chirac already requested the Conseil Constitutionnel (‘Constitutional Council’) to verify whether the Charter was compatible with the French constitution. In June 1999 the Conseil Constitutionnel declared that the obligations imposed on France by the Charter do not conflict with the French constitution,

<sup>8</sup>An excellent example of the latter is the *Livre Blanc et Noir de la Langue Bretonne* (Galv 1969).

<sup>9</sup>A full text English version of the Charter can be viewed at:  
<http://www.parlinkom.gv.at/pd/pm/XXI/I/texte/004/I00437.html>

<sup>10</sup><http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/dglf/lang-reg/presentation-lang-reg.htm>

with the exception of article 7 and, more significantly, the preamble of the Charter. The conflict was said to arise to the extent that these sections of the Charter give “specific rights to speakers of regional or minority languages in the territories where these languages are spoken”<sup>11</sup>. In June 1999 proposition by Prime Minister Jospin to amend the constitution, allowing France to ratify the Charter, was turned down by Chirac. The French president said he refused to initiate any changes to the constitution that “would attack the fundamental principles of the Republic,” a statement that caused demonstrations by supporters of regional languages, especially in Brittany. A subsequent suggestion by Jospin for new legislation to develop regional languages ‘independently’ from the still unratified Charter was also rejected.

## 5.4 Diwan

Since the Breton language is perceived by the members of the Breton movement as the basis for the Breton identity, there has always been a strong interest in preserving that language and passing it on to future generations. Already aspiring to emulate the by then well established system of Welsh education, Breton militants finally became convinced that such a project was also viable in France in 1977, when they learned of a Basque medium school in Southern France. In April 1977 the organization Diwan (Breton: ‘seed; germination’) was founded as an ‘association’ and the first Breton immersion nursery school opened on May 23 of the same year. Within the first 2 years, Diwan nursery schools were opened in 8 different towns in various parts of Brittany, causing militants to rejoice “Diwan ‘zo a tiwanañ” (“Diwan (the seed) is germinating”). However, the ‘germination’ was by no means an easy or untroubled process. Determined to offer its services for free, Diwan has often faced severe financial difficulties throughout its history. Initially, the organization’s only funds were the money raised by its members and the slim grants available through the Cultural Charter. (McDonald 1989: 180)

During the 1980s Diwan managed to get official approval to expand its educational program and now offers immersion schooling from the level of nursery schools all the way to the baccalauréat, though there are at present only 5 *collèges* and one *lycée* in all of Brittany. According to their website, 2761 students are registered at the 39 Diwan schools for the 2003/04 school year. Up to the 2nd year of middle school, all subjects are taught exclusively in Breton; French is then introduced as a first foreign language with a special status, in the sense that French gradually becomes a second instructional language, used, for example, for mathematics and computer science.<sup>12</sup> The organization also continues to provide free schooling and is developing plans for a school in Paris,<sup>13</sup> despite continuing financial difficulties. At the completion of this paper, a new obstacle has arisen for Diwan. The Regional Council for Brittany has offered to grant 100,000 Euro as an exceptional advance on its 2004 subvention in order to provide the organization with a financially secure start into the new year. In exchange, Diwan is to enter into talks with the National Minister of Education that aim at integrating its schools into the regular public education system. This would mean that Diwan could only offer a form of bilingual education in which French and Breton are given equal status from the very beginning. The only alternative to this radical change apparently would be a full withdrawal of support for Diwan as a (partially) state-funded school, which would force the organization to become a private, tuition-funded school organization.<sup>14</sup> The outcome of this latest struggle remains to be seen.

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<sup>11</sup> “des droits spécifiques à des locuteurs de langues régionales ou minoritaires, à l’intérieur de territoires dans lesquels ces langues sont pratiquées,” quoted from:

<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/fanch.broudic/pajennou/archives.charte.html#PageTop>

<sup>12</sup>cf. <http://www.diwanbreizh.org/sections.php4?op=viewarticle&artid=4>

<sup>13</sup>According to:

<http://www.diwanbreizh.org/article.php4?sid=782&mode=thread&order=0>

<http://diwanparis.free.fr/>

<sup>14</sup>Cf. <http://217.136.252.147/webpub/eurolang/pajenn.asp?ID=4541>

<http://www.diwanbreizh.org/article.php4?sid=850>, accessed via [www.diwanbreizh.org](http://www.diwanbreizh.org) on 12/18/2003

## 6 Summary

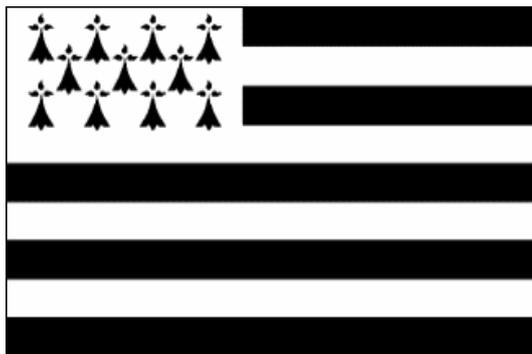
While the Breton duchy certainly possessed a significant degree of autonomy, Brittany also always displayed a certain amount of loyalty and allegiance to the French crown. Thus it would seem that the objective of a return to Brittany's independence — as it is still pursued by parts of the Breton movement — is based on an idealized, if not distorted perception of the region's history.

This observation notwithstanding, it is also clear that the status of Breton decreased the more Brittany was integrated into the French administrative system. Furthermore, Breton — like any other minority language on the territory of France — was seen as an obstacle to the total unity and equality of the French people during and after the French Revolution. In the eyes of many post-Revolutionary administrators, Breton was also associated with Catholicism, royalist movements, and resistance to the 'new system,' which provided further motives for repression. The opinion that Breton was an impoverished language, unfit for academic studies, also factored in the decline of the language.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the French government's approach seems to have switched from repressing minority languages to predominantly ignoring the issue. Official recognition of minority languages, as well as support in the form of affirmative language legislation always was always reticent and — as in the case of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages — well behind the policy making in other countries. Furthermore, there seems to be a double standard of supporting francophone language minorities abroad and affirming the importance of linguistic diversity on the international level, while severely impeding any comparable effort within their own country.

In the meantime, the Breton movement, or more precisely the *emsav* in its various stages, changed its course according to what it perceived to be the most pressing issues at the time. Responding both to the policies and actions of the French administration and more general social and political trends, the *emsav* has always been an acting as well as reacting force in the struggle to determine the status of Breton and Brittany. As the positions on both sides — government and *emsav* — are constantly being renegotiated, the outcome of this interesting linguistic and social issue is still open.

## Appendix



The flag of Brittany *Gwenn ha Du* (White and Black; *Blaunc e Neirr* in Gallo). The 4 white stripes stand for the 4 évêchés of Basse Bretagne, while the five black stripes symbolize the 5 évêchés of Haute Bretagne. The number of the Hermines (symbol of Brittany) in the upper left-hand corner has no special meaning.

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