



Autochthonous minority languages in public-sector primary education: Bilingual policies and politics in Brittany and Scotland

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between policy and politics in relation to the development of public-sector primary education through Breton and Gaelic, considering closely the patterns of power through which such provision is delivered. Brittany and Scotland present many similarities as culturally distinctive territories, contained within larger state-nations, which until recently allowed very little scope for minority language education. Initiatives to develop public-sector education through Breton and Gaelic were finally launched in the 1980s and have now become significantly institutionalised, even if they remain small in scale. The dynamics of institutionalisation have been very different in the two territories, however: parallel problems have been tackled in different ways, and issues that have proved fraught in one have presented few complications in the other. Both case studies demonstrate the importance of 'bottom-up' dynamics as a source of innovative energy.

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1. Introduction

Although the position of minority languages in education has attracted the attention of many sociolinguists and the politics of language and identity in culturally distinctive territories is a long-standing preoccupation of political science, relatively few studies have sought to examine the interaction between the substance of education policy with regard to minority languages and the patterns of power through which such provision is delivered. It is this dimension of the

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relationship between policy and politics that will be explored in the following comparative case study of Brittany and Scotland. Brittany and Scotland present many similarities as culturally distinctive territories, contained within larger state-nations, which until recently allowed very little scope for public-sector education in their autochthonous languages, Breton and Gaelic, a neglect that contributed considerably to their now-threatened condition. However, some potential for policy change emerged in the 1980s, when initiatives to develop public-sector education through the medium of Breton and Gaelic were finally launched (Timm, 2004). Nonetheless, it is widely recognised that even when the political will exists to bring about genuine change – and frequently it does not – the development of effective bilingual education policy may often be stifled by political or administrative constraints (Giordan, 1992; Giordan, 2002).

In order to determine whether significant policy shift has actually taken place in Brittany and Scotland, the discussion below will analyse not only the measures initially envisaged but also the dynamics of their implementation. With particular reference to the primary sector – often an important element in language revitalisation strategies (Jaffe, 2001) – a principal research question to be addressed here is the nature and extent of the institutionalisation process, that is, the degree of embeddedness which bilingual schooling has attained where it has been introduced into the public education system. Close attention will therefore be paid to the receptiveness displayed towards this new element by the two education systems concerned, requiring a consideration of different conceptual approaches to the functioning of each system. Firstly, however, the analysis will be contextualised through a discussion of the relationship between the issues highlighted above and the evolution of language ideology in Brittany and Scotland.

2. Education, language shift and language ideology

The positions of Breton and Gaelic education are comparable in numerous respects: both have emerged relatively recently as part of broader movements promoting cultural distinctiveness and both continue to encounter ambivalence and at times outright resistance due in significant part to the residual force of hegemonic language ideologies. Brittany and Scotland are comparable in population (4.2 million in Brittany – i.e. the official region of Bretagne plus the *département* of Loire-Atlantique – and 5.1 million in Scotland), as are the larger states in which they are contained (60 million each for France and the United Kingdom). Particularly since the 1960s, autonomy movements have played an important political role, although these have been more forceful in Scotland than in Brittany. Conversely, language issues have probably been more prominent in politics in Brittany than in Scotland (Timm, 2004), and the Breton language has certainly been more central to Breton identity than has Gaelic to Scottish identity, even if Gaelic has come to attain a more ‘national’ status in recent decades, increasingly perceived as an important element in Scotland’s cultural distinctiveness (McLeod, 2001).

Both Brittany and Scotland underwent language shift in distinct stages: first, a contraction in the later Middle Ages by which Breton and Gaelic were pushed back from politically more central areas, and, second, a decline in the ‘heartland’ during recent centuries (c. 1750 to the present) (Lloyd Humphreys, 1993; MacKinnon, 1993). Today, Breton- and Gaelic-medium education are offered across the former speech territory, not only in areas where the language is still spoken, or was spoken within the last 100–200 years, but also in areas where the language has not been widely spoken for 600–1000 years: Upper Brittany (including the cities of Nantes and Rennes, where Breton was never actually spoken) in the case of Breton, the Scottish Lowlands (including the cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow) in the case of Gaelic. Another point of sociolinguistic commonality is the presence of a third speech form, a distinct regional variety that is closely

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