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Breton in the Online Context: A New Speaker Community?

Merryn Davies–Deacon

Introduction

Breton

Breton is a member of the Brythonic branch of the Celtic family of languages, historically spoken in the region of Brittany in north-west France. While the language has experienced a gradual decline in usage since as long ago as the tenth century (Abalain 2000: 46), initially due to invasions and then as a result of the growing prestige of French, its endangerment began in earnest in the early twentieth: the separation of church and state in France in 1905, population shift as a result of the First and Second World Wars, and the subsequent turn towards industrialisation even in rural areas were all factors that encouraged the rapid decline in use of Breton. Consequently, by the 1940s, the typical patterns of language shift could be observed, with those in towns, of higher social classes, and younger and female speakers preferring to use French (Broudic 2013: 14–16). Over a million people, three quarters of the population of the western part of Brittany, known as *Breizh-Izel* ('Lower Brittany') and roughly delineated by an eastern border running from Saint-Brieuc in the north to Vannes in the south, used Breton as their preferred language of everyday communication in 1900 (Broudic 2013: 9); just under 200,000 people were estimated to speak it by 2007 (Broudic 2009: 62).

Since the early twentieth century, however, a language revitalisation movement has gradually gained prominence in Brittany, marked by several milestones such as the opening of the first Breton immersion schools in the 1970s (Abalain 2000: 80) and the gradual adoption of bilingual street and road signs since the 1980s (Abalain 2000: 87). While many parents began to stop passing Breton on to their children, some of those who had not been exposed to the language in childhood began to learn it, initially by seeking out existing speakers and later by availing themselves of a small but growing number of pedagogical resources. In a wider context, recent scholarship on **auto**chthonous minority languages has defined this type of speaker as *new speakers*, in opposition to *traditional speakers* who acquire languages “through their home and community environments” (Birmingham 2018: 112). The specific definition of the new speaker tends to vary depending on the research context and methodology employed: some work stresses a need for the language acquired not to be the common language of the wider community, while other research suggests that its not being spoken in the family is sufficient; some scholars insist on the positive attitude of the new speaker towards the language, at odds with its typical lack of prestige among traditional speakers. Taking a broad approach to the new speaker, Hornsby (2015: 108) defines the category with reference to “transmission, attitude and origin”: the new speaker has acquired the language through means other than uninterrupted intergenerational transmission, is positively disposed towards it, and need not originate from the same community as traditional speakers.

This type of sociolinguistic research on new speakers dates back only a few years: Grinevald and Bert (2011: 51) refer to the “neo-speaker”, but note that “this type of speaker has not been referenced in the literature yet”; more recently, a more substantial literature on the topic has developed (e.g. Smith-Christmas *et al.* 2018; O'Rourke & Pujolar 2019). However, in the specific context of Breton, the concept of the new speaker is present in research dating back significantly further, with the term *néo-bretonnant* (literally ‘new speaker of Breton’) first appearing in the work of Jones (1995, 1996, 1998). In the past, scholarly work has often taken an unfavourable attitude to these speakers, preferring a position of “native authenticity”, which ascribes greater value to traditional speaker practices (Hornsby & Quentel 2013: 78).

Néo-bretonnants are typically associated with a number of characteristics that differentiate them from traditional speakers: they are said to be young, middle-class, well-educated, urban, located all over Brittany, proud of their Breton identity, and militant in their use of Breton, using it in as many contexts as possible.

Traditional speakers, on the other hand, are depicted as elderly, working-class, poorly educated and unable to read and write in Breton, rural, located exclusively in *Breizh-Izel*, indifferent towards the concept of pan-Breton identity, and ashamed of their ability to speak Breton, with the effect that they speak it only with close friends and family members within their local communities. Work on Breton and its speakers has tended, not always uncritically, to repeat some or all of these stereotypes: see, for example, Jones (1995: 428–9; 1998: 132–3), Abalain (2000: 76), Timm (2001: 454; 2003: 34, 42), German (2007), Adkins (2013: 58–9), Hornsby and Quentel (2013: 75–76), Le Dù and Le Berre (2013: 53), Le Nevez (2013: 92), and Rottet (2014: 212–3). However, more recently, some work has called attention to the problematic nature of this discourse and emphasised the need for a more nuanced approach (see Hornsby 2021).

Stereotypes relating to the type of language used by the *néo-bretonnants* are equally prevalent. As they are characterised as L2 speakers of Breton, structural elements of their language, such as word order in spontaneous speech and phonology, are said to be heavily influenced by French (Timm 2003: 42). On the other hand, those parts of language more easily consciously modified, such as word order in more measured speech and lexicon, are claimed to be deliberately distanced from French (German 2007: 153). *Néo-bretonnants*, we are told, thus tend to make efforts to use VSO (the typical unmarked word order in traditional Breton), while traditional speakers frequently depart from this for stylistic reasons; *néo-bretonnants* are also said to favour neologisms based on Celtic lexical roots over the French-derived borrowings that traditional speakers will often make use of (Jones 1998: 134).

Another linguistic attribute of the *néo-bretonnants* is their supposed preference for standard language. Traditional speakers typically use dialectal forms of Breton, i.e. local varieties of the language that can be grouped into four main regional dialects corresponding with the former bishoprics of *Breizh-Izel*. *Néo-bretonnants*, it is claimed, instead use a standard form based mostly on the Leoneg¹ dialect, the geographically most distant from, and hence structurally least influenced by, French: this standardised variety is that found in grammars such as Hemon (1964). There is no officially prescribed standard form of Breton that has been comprehensively codified, but, as later sections of this chapter will show, institutional use of the language tends to employ this standardised Leoneg-based variety, tending moreover towards the use of Celtic-derived neologisms in preference over French borrowings, which follows the stereotypical *néo-bretonnant* practice. This de facto standard typically encompasses the use of a particular orthography, referred to as *peurunvan* ('supraunified'). However, other orthographic systems co-exist: the two other most widely used supradialectal orthographies are known as *skolveurieg* ('university spelling') and *etrerannyezhel* ('interdialectal'). Abalain (2000: 85) reports that in the late twentieth century, 73.4% of those who wrote in Breton preferred *peurunvan*, while 14.6% used *skolveurieg*, showing that at least in orthographic terms, there is in fact some room for departure from the standard.

Breton on the internet

Here, we focus on the use of Breton in online contexts, with the intent to determine whether these are populated by a community of stereotypical new speakers. This chapter therefore offers a case study of contemporary Breton speakers who use their language in online settings, offering insights into the way language on the internet may conform to or reject the supposed linguistic features used by new speakers. In the case of Breton, the web is indeed a context where we would expect this type of speaker to be prevalent, based on the supposed attributes of *néo-bretonnants* seen in the previous section: their youth, higher social class, and proximity to urban centres are all factors that would imply they are more likely internet users than the traditional speaker population. Additionally, given that much online content is in written form, if traditional speakers are unable to read and write Breton this precludes them from using the language in this context. Finally, the fact that traditional speakers are said to restrict their use of Breton to intimate settings implies that even if they had access to the internet and were literate in Breton to a degree that would enable them to use it in this manner, they would not wish to do so. The web thus appears to be a context where we would expect the majority of content, particularly that in written form, to be produced by new speakers, and hence by stereotypical *néo-bretonnants*, if we are to accept the claims of earlier research.

Breton has a modest but visible presence online. It can be observed in official contexts, such as the websites of the regional council of Brittany and of the five² departmental councils within the region: many of these offer a few pages in or about Breton, while the regional council allows visitors to view the entire site through the language.³ Breton is additionally identifiable on social networking sites: *Indigenous Tweets* indicates that it ranks within the top twenty of the world's minoritised languages in terms of the number of tweets sent on an all-time basis.⁴ On Facebook, beyond use on personal profiles, a number of groups specifically encourage interaction in Breton; the largest of these, *Facebook e brezhoneg!*, will be discussed below.

Examining the online use of Breton can be instrumental in investigating the stereotypes about new speakers of the language. If all new speakers are *néo-bretonnants*, who supposedly use a standardised form of Breton, we would expect to see this form of Breton in a dominant position in online contexts. If this is not the case, and we see the use of other varieties, it would seem either that not all users of Breton online are new speakers, or that not all new speakers identify with the stereotypical *néo-bretonnant* category and with standard language. Either of these findings would thus suggest that there may be more fluidity among speaker types than some research has suggested, with a number of speakers not fitting neatly into one of the two opposing categories. Moreover, if this is found to be the case, speakers who use Breton in these contexts must negotiate their use of language to communicate with others who may use Breton in diverse ways, potentially leading to a wider range of communicative practices on an intraspeaker level offline as well as online as an example of mediatisation (see Androutsopoulos 2016).

Research design

Contexts examined

In order to examine the online presence of Breton and the forms that it can take, this chapter highlights three contexts from the web: one standard, one non-standard, and the third heteroglossic, an example of user-generated “unregimented writing” (Androutsopoulos 2016: 287) where individual contributors may choose to use either standard or non-standard varieties.

First, it will concentrate on the website of *Ofis publik ar brezhoneg* (‘The public office of the Breton language’, OPAB), the authority with overall responsibility for Breton language planning, investigating the way it depicts Breton and its varieties. There follows a brief discussion of the presence of non-standard Breton in online contexts. After this, the bulk of the analysis concentrates on the use of Breton in the Facebook group *Facebook e brezhoneg!*,⁵ drawing from a sample of posts from the group gathered in 2017. Features of the orthography, lexicon, and dialectal qualities of the sample are highlighted in order to illustrate the diversity of Breton users’ linguistic practices, and to give an indication of how the use of Breton in this online context can differ from its use in other more traditional media settings.

For this work, *Facebook e brezhoneg!* was systematically sampled and analysed as part of a larger research project concentrating on the use of lexicon in Breton media. The information given on OPAB’s website and on examples of non-standard Breton contextualises the heteroglossic *Facebook e brezhoneg!*, worthy of more in-depth analysis because of this multiauthorship and increased “interactive potential for individual speakers” (Reershemius 2017: 37), allowing us further insight into the wider online speaker community in a way that is characteristic of the performance era of media for autochthonous minority languages (see Introduction, this volume).

OPAB’s website is investigated due to its status as the official body responsible for Breton language planning, and hence as a presumed first port of call for individuals wishing to learn about the language. This supplies us with an online example of standard Breton; cases of non-standard language use online are harder to find due to their lack of official status, and those drawn from in this chapter were found through observation of Breton-language social media, noting which sites were linked to by users. For an appropriate social media context, *Facebook e brezhoneg!* was selected due to its high levels of activity. As well as being the most popular social network in France at the time of data collection,⁶ Facebook is more suited to sustained conversation than its

largest competitor, Twitter. On Twitter, many of the accounts using Breton are operated on behalf of organisations rather than individuals; tweets are often used to link to content on other websites rather than inciting a conversation within Twitter itself; and at the time of data collection each tweet was limited to 140 characters. This meant that Facebook was a more suitable source for gathering data in the format of a conversation between two or more individuals and a greater insight into how the online speaker community is formed.

A number of Facebook groups relating to Breton exist for different purposes, including general discussion, learning the language, and more militant groups encouraging the use of Breton in public contexts. *Facebook e brezhoneg!* is the largest and most active of these, as well as one of the longest established, created in 2012. Its original purpose was as a campaign group pressuring Facebook staff to allow the site's interface to be translated into Breton; after this goal was achieved in late 2014, the group became a general message board for Breton speakers (see also Heyen's discussion of "breathing spaces", this volume, highlighting the importance of this type of community for autochthonous minority language speakers). At the time of data collection, there were over 10000 members, including Breton speakers, learners, researchers, and authority figures such as dictionary compilers and members of OPAB staff. As an "open group", anyone can view posts and search the group without requiring a Facebook account, while any logged-in Facebook user can join the group and leave comments without prior moderation. Given that *Facebook e brezhoneg!* was and remains the largest and most active Facebook group for Breton speakers, it was deemed the most suitable context for investigating the "virtual community" (Belmar and Glass 2019) of Breton speakers and determining whether this can be considered a community of stereotypical new speakers, bearing in mind the caveat that any conclusions drawn relate to members of this group specifically and not necessarily to the wider population of Breton-speaking internet users.

Breton is the most frequently used language on *Facebook e brezhoneg!*, but French is also common, given that all Breton speakers within Brittany also speak French. French is often used by learners requesting linguistic help, or in translations appended to posts written in Breton. This is done despite group administrators' apparent efforts to construct the group as a Breton-only space: its header image, in place since 2016,⁷ informs users, in both French and Breton, that posts should be written in Breton. However, based on the posts sampled, the use of French does not seem to attract any negative attention (see also Reershemius, this volume, on the comparative lack of language policing in more recent social media contexts). Language is a frequent subject of discussion, but so is news, particularly on political topics, from both within Brittany and beyond. The group is also used to advertise events such as Breton classes and conversation circles; unlike the Facebook group examined by Zieseler (this volume), while the question of neologisms and borrowings is salient for the analysis presented here, *Facebook e brezhoneg!* does not deal exclusively with the Breton language itself.

Data sampling and analysis

A sample of around 11000 words was taken from *Facebook e brezhoneg!*, comprising posts written between November 2016 and March 2017; 99 different users are represented in the sample. A small number of criteria were developed in order to determine which posts would be included: the subject matter of the original post had to be non-linguistic to minimise chances of including vocabulary or orthographies not normally employed by the writer; the first post in each thread had to be made up of text rather than a link or uncaptioned photo, to ease analysis; and at least 50% of the post had to be in Breton. Moreover, posts were sampled only if they had at least one top-level response in Breton from a different user, to ensure that their content was accepted as valid Breton by interlocutors.

Usernames and other potentially identifying information were removed, and the sample was encoded according to the Text Encoding Initiative⁸ in a way that preserved the nested comment structure of Facebook posts. This enabled statistical analysis of the sample and comparison with data from other sources. For the wider research project, which focused on the lexicon in order to determine whether the users of Breton in this and other media contexts fit the stereotypical attributes of new speakers, a systematic method was used to tag specific lexemes for statistical comparison across contexts (for details, see Davies-Deacon 2020: 55–60). Items of orthographic interest also emerged while tagging the data by hand, and while less relevant to the wider

research, are also discussed here as they contribute to the understanding of how new speakers use Breton in these online contexts and whether this conforms with the standard variety.

Research questions

The wider project from which the *Facebook e brezhoneg!* data are taken was primarily concerned with whether features attested in Breton-language media support or challenge the traditional academic perception of *néo-bretonnants* and their language, i.e. that they tend to use a more standard linguistic variety. For the purposes of this chapter, focusing on online contexts and bringing in additional websites for contextualisation and comparison, we can ask: does the online context more broadly, based on the sites examined, reflect these supposed features of new speakers of Breton, and can it therefore be considered a new speaker community? How do new speakers of Breton in the online context communicate with a potentially diverse group of interlocutors, while using language in a way that expresses their own specific identity?

Standard Breton online: OPAB

The role of OPAB

As noted above, language planning for Breton is the responsibility of OPAB. Set up in 1999 as *Ofis ar brezhoneg*, the organisation became a public body in 2010 as a result of regional and departmental legislation (Cadot 2010). Since then, it has been accountable to the regional government of Brittany and the councils of the five departments of the historical region of Brittany, receiving funding from them as well as from the French state. Its headquarters are located in Carhaix, situated in inland Finistère, the part of the region with the highest population of traditional speakers of Breton. However, OPAB is decentralised, with further offices located in the other four departments so as to cover the entire cultural territory of Brittany.⁹

OPAB is involved in all elements of language planning for Breton: status planning, acquisition planning, and corpus planning. In terms of status planning, it works with regional and departmental councils to ensure representation of Breton in the public space, such as road signs, and encourages municipal councils and private businesses to sign up to the charter “Ya d’ar brezhoneg” (‘Yes to Breton’) as official proof that the town or organisation is inclusive of the language. Its involvement with acquisition planning entails the compilation of statistics on enrolment in immersion and bilingual schools, and the provision of details on where such schools are located, as well as information on classes for adults and the creation of advertising campaigns to encourage members of the public to sign up for these classes. For corpus planning, OPAB maintains a database of recommended terminology, known as TermOfis,¹⁰ actively developed by a small team of researchers based in its Rennes office. Other linguistic services it provides through its website include a database of place names, KerOfis,¹¹ that lists the official Breton form of each, and a historical corpus of Breton including words from sources ranging in publication date from the eleventh century to today. It also offers a professional translation service, which markets itself as applicable to diverse contexts: “panelloù, teulioù melestradurel, kazetennoù, levrioù, lec’hiannoù Internet ...” (‘signs, administrative documents, magazines, books, websites’).¹² Moreover, it provides recommendations on the use of specific vocabulary and orthography, thus presenting itself as an authority on the use of standard Breton.¹³

Another resource provided on OPAB’s website is a crowd-sourced terminology database,¹⁴ which lists two or three French terms per month and invites users to suggest and then vote on suitable Breton translations, alerting them via mailing list. While the precise features of this service deserve more discussion than is available here, it is worth noting its existence as a tangible example of how the internet can be harnessed in a way that has direct impact on the language standardisation process. Expansion of the Breton lexicon is a key focus of OPAB, with a dedicated staff maintaining their database of officially advised terminology. The words proposed in this “forum termenadurezh” (‘terminology forum’) are often connected to contemporary issues, with recent examples of French words proposed for translation including *flambée des prix* (‘explosion in prices’) and *arme à sous-munitions* (‘cluster bomb’). Giving speakers the chance to propose and vote on terms thus implicates them directly in the standardisation process, touching on one of the central themes of this

volume. Questions must be raised here around how representative these suggestions are of the wider speaker community, and it is hoped that future research will be able to investigate this more thoroughly.

Discourse around standard Breton

OPAB's presentation of Breton on its website, available in both Breton and French, is worth examining to gain insight into how the standard variety commonly associated with *néo-bretonnants* is depicted. Generally, this section of the site places emphasis on the language's historical background, as well as on its fitness for use in the modern era. We are told that Breton is "talvoudus he glad skrivet" ('significant in written heritage'),¹⁵ and various examples of written Breton are mentioned, going back as far as the oldest known manuscript, from the eighth century, and ending with recent dictionaries and work on terminology. This emphasis on the continued presence of written Breton in some form over more than a millennium has the effect of stressing the historical legitimacy not only of the language as a whole, but also of the standard variety specifically, pointing out that codification and work towards the creation of a standard language are not recent phenomena but the continuation of a far longer tradition.

These pages also emphasise the fact that Breton is a Celtic language, giving a map of the territories of the Celtic languages and noting that Breton is most closely related to Cornish and Welsh, thus highlighting its typological distance from French. Indeed, this point is used to emphasise the historical grounding of Breton: "ur yezh indezeuropek eo ar brezhoneg ; komzet e vez abaoe ouzhpenn 1500 vloaz" ('Breton is an Indo-European language; it has been spoken for over 1500 years').¹⁶ An emphasis on the continuity of Breton in some form over a large period is thus again made, with the assertion that Breton is "Indo-European" also alluding to this historicity, and its place among the other languages of Europe. This, along with the emphasis on the literary tradition noted above, confers legitimacy on the status of Breton as a result of its historical roots and distance from French.

Later on, information is provided that specifically relates to the traditional dialects and standard variety of Breton. This stresses the intercomprehensibility of the dialects, noting first that it may be more appropriate to divide them into a western group and an eastern group rather than the traditional division along the lines of the four bishoprics, and thus implying that the number of dialectal differences may be smaller than suggested elsewhere. This is also suggested in the presentation of information about the structural differences among the dialects:

N'eo ket ken bras-se an diforc'hioù ha sellet a reont dreist-holl ouzh an taol-mouezh hag an distagadur. N'eus ket nemeur a ziforc'hioù a-fet geriaoueg ha yezhadur. Peurvuiañ e c'haller kompren mat an eil egile, ha hep tamm diaezamant ebet zoken evit an dud a oar lenn ha skrivañ. ('The differences are not so large, and have to do mostly with tonic accent and pronunciation. There are hardly any differences with respect to vocabulary and grammar. The vast majority of people can understand each other well, and, for those who can read and write, even with no difficulty at all.' <https://www.brezhoneg.bzh/55-istor.htm>, accessed 1 November 2021)

This page thus strongly downplays the differences among the dialects. Academic sources tend to be more nuanced on this issue, with some scholars suggesting that while this may be the case in linguistic terms, there is nonetheless a conceptual stumbling block in the minds of many traditional speakers that prevents them from communicating with speakers of other dialects (German 2007: 153).

This presentation of Breton by OPAB therefore points to a natural evolution towards modern standard Breton, involving the convergence of the dialects over time, largely independent of French influence. It does however acknowledge the role of intentional standardisation:

Diazezet eo bet ar brezhoneg modern gant yezhadurourien ha geriadurourien, da gentañ adalek ar XVIIvet kantved (an Tad Maner) hag an XVIIIvet kantved (Gregor Rostrenenn) ha dreist-holl en XIXvet hag XXvet kantved, gant luskad Gwalarn pergen (1925) a roas lañs da vat d'al lennegezh vodern e brezhoneg. ('Modern Breton has been standardised by linguists and lexicographers, starting in the 17th century (Père Maunoir) and the 18th century (Grégoire de Rostrenenn), and

particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries, especially by the Gwalarn movement (1925), which truly gave rise to modern literature in Breton.’ <https://www.brezhoneg.bzh/55-istor.htm>, accessed 1 November 2021)

Again, though, this passage highlights the historical roots of standard Breton by citing early examples of standardisation, and links the standard to the earlier evocation of Breton’s literary heritage, suggesting that its creation was necessary in order to ensure the continuation of that heritage. Standardisation is thus at once presented as a natural, inevitable process, resulting in a language that would not be too far removed from the traditional dialects, and as a necessary one, creating a language suitable for the modern world. Indeed, the final paragraph of the page characterises modern Breton as “ur yezh skoueriektaet evit gallout en em dennañ e kement degouezh a vefe hag evit bezañ gouest da vont diouzh emdroadur an teknologiezhioù er bed a vremañ” (‘a standardised language in order to deal with any situation that may arise, and to be capable of responding to the evolution of technologies in the modern world’)¹⁷ – the implication is that without standardisation, this would not be possible. OPAB thus suggests that the historical evolution of Breton has led to a single, uncontested standard variety, best equipped both to respect the language’s prestigious written history and to take it forward into the future. This is the perspective we would expect the stereotypical new speaker to hold, suggesting that OPAB staff form part of the *néo-bretonnant* community and expect readers of these pages to be sympathetic to this presentation of the language.

OPAB does not discuss the standardisation of Breton orthography in any detail, nor the fact that competing supradialectal orthographies continue to exist. Its preference for the de facto standard spelling system, *peurunvan*, is evident from the fact that the basic Breton-French machine translation service it offers¹⁸ does not recognise words spelt in other orthographies. In the domain of lexicon, however, this tool appears to tolerate a greater range of variation, correctly rendering translations of some well-known items of dialectal vocabulary, such as Leoneg *kouer* (‘farmer’, standard *peizant*) and Gwenedeg *get* (‘with’, standard *gant*) and *doc’h* (‘to, from, at’, overlapping in meaning with standard *ouzh*, *diouzh*, and *eus*). It also recognises some cases of non-standard borrowed vocabulary such as *telefon*, a borrowing from French *téléphone* (standard *pellgomzer*). This indicates a desire to include speakers whose lexis does not match the standard, at least in the cases of these well-known non-standard words. However, this inclusion is restricted to the implicit, with no overt acknowledgement of any debate over the lexicon. In summary, OPAB presents Breton as a fully standardised and largely homogeneous language, and therefore seems to cater more for the stereotypical *néo-bretonnant* than any other type of speaker.

Non-standard Breton online

Online spaces that make use of non-standard varieties of Breton can be identified, but tend not to represent official bodies and are hence much less visible than contexts such as OPAB’s website. Moreover, when these online spaces are maintained by small voluntary groups or individuals, they are constantly at risk of sudden deletion if the owner loses the interest, time, or resources required. One example, *Brezhoneg Digor*, which provided recordings and transcriptions of traditional Breton speakers, was deleted suddenly in 2018, with its maintainer leaving the following message:

J’ai commencé ce travail, transcrire et élaborer le dictionnaire du centre-Bretagne, dans le but d’avoir le niveau nécessaire pour parler et être compris des bretonnants natifs, ce but est dorénavant atteint. ... Mais devant le peu d’intérêt qu’il suscite, si je me fie au nombre ridiculement bas de commentaires postés sur le blog et/ou sur Youtube depuis 11 ans, j’ai donc décidé de me délester de cette charge de travail qui n’est, pour moi, plus une nécessité. (‘I started this work, transcribing and annotating the dictionary of the central Breton dialect, with the aim of reaching a level sufficient for speaking to and being understood by native Breton speakers; this goal has since been achieved. ... But given the lack of interest it attracts, if I go by the ridiculously low number of comments posted on the blog and/or on YouTube over the past eleven years, I have therefore decided to relieve myself of this workload, which is no longer necessary for my own purposes.’)

<https://web.archive.org/web/20181220035637/https://brezhoneg-digor.blogspot.com/>, accessed 27 October 2021)

The same individual continues to upload recordings of conversations with traditional speakers to YouTube, but without the additional linguistic resources formerly provided.¹⁹ It can be noted that by setting himself apart from “native Breton speakers”, the maintainer of this resource appears to fall into the new speaker category, but that his alignment with traditional dialectal varieties distances him from the theorised community of new speakers who use a standardised variety of Breton: this is a case of a new speaker of Breton using the technological tools at his disposal, but certainly not in the sense of contributing to a “new speaker community” as we would understand the term.

Another example of online non-standard Breton investigated for this research is loeizherrieu.fr,²⁰ an informational portal dedicated to the life and work of early twentieth-century Breton writer Loeiz Herrieu, praised by the website as “celui qui a certainement fait le plus pour que la langue bretonne vive dans le Pays Vannetais” (‘the person who was surely the most responsible for the survival of Breton in the Gwenedeg dialect area’).²¹ Accordingly, his use of the Gwenedeg dialect is presented on the site as a central characteristic of his work.

As well as information on Herrieu’s life and work, the site also presents information on Gwenedeg in general. In contradiction of OPAB’s website, it presents dialectal differences in Breton as significant to the point of non-comprehension, quoting from the work of Breton scholar Fañch Morvannou:

Peurvuian e vez diaes d’ar vrezhonegerion KLT lenn gwenedeg kozh, ha diaessoc’h c’hoazh komz gwenedeg. Ken diaes ail e vez moarvad da vrezhonegerion Bro-Wened lenn KLT, ha ken diaes ail komz. Ha kement-man en desped d’ar strivoù a zo bet gwraet ewid tostaad dre skrid an daou rummad parlantoù an eil douzh egile. (‘For the most part, it is hard for KLT [non-Gwenedeg] Breton speakers to read old Gwenedeg, and harder still for them to speak Gwenedeg. Conversely, it is of course as hard for most Breton speakers from the Gwenedeg area to read KLT, and as hard to speak it. And this is despite the work that has been done to bring the two groups of dialects together in written form.’ <http://loeizherrieu.fr/www/tests/tournures.html>, accessed 1 November 2021)

This passage is written in standard Breton, albeit in Morvannou’s preferred *etrerannyezhel* orthography rather than *peurunvan*. However, the most visible examples of Breton on the site take the form of menu links and page headers, which can be seen on every page. These are bilingual, with the Breton versions written in Gwenedeg, using traditional Gwenedek orthography rather than, for example, *peurunvan* or *etrerannyezhel* with Gwenedek variants and vocabulary. Other parts of the site use different dialects and orthographies: song examples from collections made by Herrieu are reprinted in their original versions, either Gwenedeg in the traditional orthography or another dialect using traditional KLT orthography. Excerpts of Herrieu’s writing are kept in their original form, i.e. Gwenedeg with traditional Gwenedek orthography. Other excerpts from materials originally written in standard Breton are kept in their original form, while many pages contain no Breton at all other than in headers and the menu bar. The one page that appears to contain Breton passages not reprinted from another source uses the *etrerannyezhel* orthography with Gwenedek vocabulary.²²

The use of Breton on the site is therefore minimal: it is mostly restricted to reprints from other sources rather than having been composed specifically for use here. Where the small amount of Breton specific to the site is concerned, it is interesting to note the difference in orthographies between menu items and headers and actual content: the latter, serving a more communicative purpose, uses a modern orthography, while menu items and headers, contributing more to the site’s visual identity (and accompanied by a French version in all cases), use the more identifiably Gwenedek traditional orthography. While non-standard Breton is used in both cases, the more non-standard of the two kinds is reserved for these more presentational, less information-rich contexts. This highlights the fact that non-standard Breton has the semiotic advantage of conveying a more localised identity than the standard is able to do, but equally that this comes at the risk of inhibiting comprehensibility. The distribution of orthographies on loeizherrieu.fr shows a pragmatic response to this dilemma: in contexts where communication is more important, a more standard version prevails; where identity can be prioritised, the Breton used is less standard.

While OPAB's website and loeizherrieu.fr provide examples of different uses to which Breton is put online, and the way its form varies accordingly, static websites of this kind tell us little about the speaker community: there is often no way of telling whether other speakers engage with the content of the site. While this shows that non-standard varieties of Breton can be seen online, we need to turn to a social networking site to determine whether such non-standard forms are actually employed in communicative contexts on the internet, and whether these contexts suggest an online presence of the typical "new speaker community" that research on Breton²³ suggests will exist.

Breton on Facebook: *Facebook e brezhoneg!*

Theoretical considerations

Gathering data from social media is subject to a number of methodological issues that must be borne in mind during the analysis of such data. The ever-changing nature of social media platforms means that it is important to consider the fact that data gathered from these sources function as a snapshot only of the time at which they were produced, and may not be as relevant to our understanding of how the language community has evolved since, even at a distance of only a few years. Moreover, it is crucial to be aware of difficulties in making assumptions about offline communities based on the language practices we observe in online settings. Blommaert and Szabla (2017: 11) note that online communication is a "complex game" where speakers rely on diverse resources to mitigate for the lack of nonverbal contextualisation cues. To researchers viewing such communications after the fact, these resources can be difficult to identify and interpret, and we should be cautious in taking online language use at its face value, especially in the case of autochthonous minority languages, where identity construction is particularly important, as noted in the introduction to this volume.

Similarly, it is important not to consider the online community a substitute for offline ones. In the context of autochthonous minority languages, where speakers can be prevented from using their language in their local surroundings due to practical constraints such as the lack of a critical mass of speakers, it is tempting to view online contexts as a solution to some of these problems. However, speakers interviewed for the wider research project from which these data are drawn pointed out the drawbacks of relying on these virtual spaces, with one noting:

je pense que c'est très positif, c'est très important d'utiliser la langue bretonne sur Facebook [...] mais il faut faire attention, je pense, de n'y pas construire une sorte de mirage, d'avoir l'impression qu'il y a une vraie société bretonne [...] c'est bien, avoir une société bretonne virtuelle, une société en langue bretonne virtuelle, mais il ne faut pas non plus abandonner l'objectif d'avoir une vraie société bretonne avec des gens qu'on rencontre vraiment dans la rue, pour parler la langue dans les magasins, pour acheter des choses et cetera, et il ne faut pas perdre la vue de cet objectif-là aussi. Et le temps qu'on passe sur Facebook tout seul devant son ordinateur, on ne passe pas à avoir des activités ou à faire des choses avec de vraies personnes en parlant cette langue-là ('I think it's very positive, very important to use Breton on Facebook ... but I think we need to be careful not to make it into a kind of mirage, to think there's a real Breton-speaking society ... it's good to have a virtual Breton-speaking society, but we mustn't abandon the goal of a real Breton-speaking society with people that we meet physically in the street, where we can speak Breton in shops when we're buying things and so on, we mustn't lose sight of this objective either. And the time we spend on Facebook alone in front of our computers is time we're not using to participate in activities or do things with real people speaking Breton')

As a result, we must be cautious in applying any conclusions drawn about the online context to the community of Breton speakers and their language use in general; as the remainder of the chapter will show, the language used in this context can often go beyond a merely communicative function, perhaps to a greater extent than in offline settings. Because of this, similarly, it is important to be aware that quantitative analysis alone is insufficient for interpreting the nuances of the highly context-dependent data found on Facebook. The findings I present in this chapter mostly relate to individual cases of language use that suggest certain attitudes were

present among users of the group at the time of data collection, and are not intended to contribute to claims about the speaker community as a whole; indeed, my aim is to demonstrate that making such general claims in the first place fails to understand the complex and heterogeneous nature of autochthonous minority language communities.

Orthographies and dialects

While *Facebook e brezhoneg!* is not a context specifically dedicated to non-standard Breton, it nonetheless contains examples of orthographic conventions other than the de facto standard *peurunvan*. Among modern supradialectal orthographies, *peurunvan* is the most frequently used in the sample, but *etrerannyezhel* and *skolveurieg* can also be identified, showing that despite their general lack of use at institutional level, these continue to be used by individuals. There are also examples of dialectal orthographies: one user writes *berman* ('now') and *berton* ('Breton') instead of standard *bremañ* and *breton*, indicating their alignment with the Gwenedeg dialect, while another writes *brezouneg* ('Breton language') instead of standard *brezhoneg*, a marker of the Leoneg dialect. These minor adaptations of standard orthographies allow the expression of a dialectal identity, whilst remaining comprehensible to users of other dialects or standard Breton; indeed, they attract replies from users of dialects other than their own, showing that these minor variations are no detriment to intelligibility. A small number of posts in the sample are written entirely in the distinctive Gwenedek orthography: they, on the other hand, receive only replies that are also in Gwenedeg, suggesting that speakers of other varieties may be unable or unwilling to engage with them.

Variable orthographic decisions are also made in the case of brand names. In a discussion of the board game Scrabble, two users keep the standard spelling of the game's name, but another two adapt it to a Breton-style orthography, writing *Skrabell*. This adaptation of a brand name, uncommon in major world languages, may indicate a more stereotypically *néo-breton* position, where neologisms are favoured over borrowings, and where unavoidable borrowings are adapted to fit the conventions of Breton to the greatest possible extent. Both versions seem to be considered acceptable to readers, however: no user comments on another's orthographic choice. *Facebook e brezhoneg!* thus appears to be an inclusive space in this respect, where users' different linguistic decisions are generally respected despite the divergent ideologies that are likely to motivate them. Likewise, while posts written in strongly dialectal varieties may not be engaged with by users of the standard, neither are they criticised.

Another orthographic feature seen on Facebook is the use of contractions to mark colloquial language. The unusual nature of much computer-mediated communication as a medium that is written in form but contains many characteristics of speech means that features of this type are uniquely prevalent in the research context of social media, particularly when compared with traditional media forms such as magazines. Thus in the sample from *Facebook e brezhoneg!* we see the phrase "deuz ar henta" (the *skolveurieg* equivalent of *peurunvan* "deus ar c'hentañ", meaning 'until next time') rendered as "z ar henta". Non-standard uses of orthography thus convey not only allegiance to a particular dialect, or alignment with one side or the other of the new/traditional speaker divide, but in this case, also to a more colloquial linguistic register: in the online context in particular, "spelling variants can be socially meaningful" (Androutsopoulos 2016: 289).

Borrowings and neologisms

As the introduction to this chapter states, the lexicon of Breton is one particularly visible domain in which *néo-bretonnants* are said to differ from traditional speakers of the language. Previous research has asserted that especially for the expression of new concepts for which no word existed in Breton prior to the onset of widespread community bilingualism with French, *néo-bretonnants* are said to prefer Celtic neologisms, thus avoiding French influence as much as possible, while traditional speakers are more willing to employ French borrowings (German 2007: 153). Thus we are told that traditional speakers will prefer words such as *magazin* ('shop', < French *magasin*), *rezen* ('reason', < French *raison*), and *boulangerezh* ('bakery', < French *boulangerie* with a Breton suffix), while new speakers will prefer *stal*, *abeg*, and *baraerezh*, which are presented as adaptations of existing Breton words through semantic expansion, or in the case of *baraerezh*, a new coinage based on compounding (*bara*, 'bread', + *-er*, an agentive suffix, + *-ezh*, a suffix denoting an

activity). The preference for neologism has hence become associated with contemporary standard Breton, and indeed neologisms tend to take precedence over borrowings in TermOfis, OPAB’s database of recommended official terms (Davies-Deacon 2020: 113). Moreover, as we have suggested, the stereotypes around new and traditional speakers of Breton suggest that Facebook should be a community populated exclusively by the former, i.e. by stereotypical *néo-bretonnants* and standard language. If all these stereotypes hold true, we would therefore expect borrowings, beyond long-established examples, to be limited in this context.

Again, however, this is not the case, and we do find numerous examples in *Facebook e brezhoneg!* of words wholly or partly borrowed from French, including some cases that appear to be one-off borrowings: *teleferik* (‘cable-car’, < French *téléphérique*), *seksist* (‘sexist’, < French *sexiste*), and *reptilianed* (‘reptiles’, < French *reptile* plus a Breton plural suffix) are all attested in the sample, instead of standard *fungarr*, *revelour*, and *stlejeviled*. In these examples, the users appear to be deliberately distancing themselves from standard lexemes that have been created during the twentieth century following the neologistic model, and thus going against the stereotypical *néo-bretonnant* alignment, again suggesting that there is room in the social media context for non-standard Breton and a range of speaker perspectives and identities. The examples of *teleferik* and *seksist* also show that a degree of respelling is often necessary in these one-off borrowings: like *Skrabell*, they are altered to comply with Breton orthographic conventions, suggesting in these cases that a degree of alignment with standard Breton is nonetheless maintained.

While the fairly small size of the sample (around 11000 words) does not lend itself to detailed statistical analysis at the level of the lexeme, some basic statistical methods can be used to investigate choices relating to the question of borrowings versus coinages in more depth. A small number of terms relating to the media were investigated for their rate of occurrence, along with words meaning “thank you”, a commonly cited (German 2007: 186; Blanchard, Calvez and Thomas 2013: 150; Lossec 2013: 26; Rottet 2014:240) case where a result of recent semantic expansion coexists with a borrowing considered to be favoured by traditional speakers. The occurrence of these words in the corpus is summed up in Table 1, along with the recommendations found in TermOfis.

Table 1 Borrowings and neologisms on Facebook

		Borrowing		Neologism			TermOfis recommendation
		# Tokens	# Unique users		# Tokens	# Unique users	
‘radio’	radio	4	3	skingomz	0	0	<i>radio</i> except in some phrases
‘telephone’	telefon	0	0	pellgomz	5	3	pellgomz
‘internet’	internet	9	8	kenrouedad	2	2	<i>kenrouedad</i> except in some phrases
‘television’	tele/TV	1	1	skinwel	1	1	skinwel
‘thank you’	mersi	6	4	trugarez	6	6	trugarez

In most cases, TermOfis recommends a Celtic-derived term, as expected in standard, *néo-bretonnant*-aligned Breton. Where it recommends a borrowed word, in the case of *radio*, this is the only term we find in the corpus: the neologism *skingomz* appears to have been deemed excessive, even by OPAB. Where TermOfis recommends a neologism, attitudes vary among users: *pellgomz* appears to be universally accepted, while the options for ‘television’ and ‘thank you’ show a roughly equal divide between users, although this is based on a very small sample size in the former case. For ‘internet’, *internet* occurs noticeably more frequently than *kenrouedad*, showing in this case of a much more recent term how the borrowing may have become established in the community before the official neologism was decided on. Overall, these data show that in a number of cases, there is no consensus among speakers on which of the two options should be used, showing

again that for various items of vocabulary, individual Facebook users have different opinions on whether borrowings or coinages should be used, and that they do not all fit the *néo-bretonnant* stereotype of preferring neologism.

In comparison with other media contexts examined for the same research, *Facebook e brezhoneg!* displays some characteristics that go further in developing our understanding of the specificities of the online setting. Despite the cases of non-standard language discussed above, in comparison with a range of radio programmes and printed media publications (two magazines and a newspaper), the Facebook data were found to exhibit the highest use of neologisms over borrowings, suggesting a higher overall adherence to *néo-breton*. This contradicts general findings relating to linguistic register, which suggested that higher registers of language tended to use more standard and typically more *néo-breton* vocabulary. As an example of computer-mediated communication, we would expect the Facebook context to fall between the others in terms of its register, and indeed it can be judged to do so, going by criteria such as the morphosyntactic complexity of the data produced in this context. It is therefore surprising that the use of neologisms in the Facebook sample occurs at a higher rate than elsewhere, rather than in an intermediate position.

This information can also be contrasted with the fact that the Facebook data also show the highest use of terms not advised in TermOfis, as well as exhibiting a higher use of terms with meanings not attested in standard dictionaries of Breton. This suggests that language is used on Facebook in an innovative, perhaps even playful way, not surprising when “more than other media, digital communication has been associated with humour, joking, language play, role play, and other nonserious communication” (Vandergriff 2010: 235; see also Arendt and Stern, this volume). This finding raises an important point about the difference between standard Breton and *néo-breton*: the use of Breton in this context is often highly *néo-breton* but not standard, showing that these two terms cannot be equated. While this deserves further investigation, it shows from the outset that based on linguistic practices, the question of who is a new speaker, a *néo-bretonnant*, or a user of standard Breton is more complex than it may seem, especially in this highly performative online setting.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered a variety of online contexts in which Breton is used: the official website of OPAB, some websites maintained by individuals that make use of non-standard vocabulary, and a heteroglossic social media context. It has shown, in general, that despite OPAB’s prioritisation of the standard, non-standard and dialectal Breton have an identifiable online presence, both in dedicated spaces such as *loeizherrieu.fr* and, to a lesser extent, on Facebook. The Facebook data also show a certain degree of resistance to the typical decision in standard Breton to use Celtic-derived neologisms rather than French-derived borrowings, with various examples of such non-standard borrowings attested. While users of Breton online may or may not be new speakers in the strict sense, the extent to which they engage with stereotypical new speaker practices varies.

Comparing the orthography of the three contexts, it can be seen that different practices are available and index multiple ways of signalling allegiance with standard or dialectal varieties of Breton. OPAB’s website makes no mention of the fact that orthographies other than *peurunvan* have ever been available; contrastingly, *loeizherrieu.fr* uses the original orthographies of quoted texts, resulting in a multiplicity of orthographies. For links and headers, as noted, it employs the Gwenedek dialectal orthography in a symbolic fashion, always side-by-side with French, which allows the site to avoid any issues of comprehension caused by using this lesser-known spelling system; in doing so, it also signals an ideological non-alignment with OPAB, whose website presents Breton as fully standardised. *Facebook e brezhoneg!*, as a heteroglossic context, shows a range of orthographic practices, but mostly conforms to the de facto standard *peurunvan*, suggesting that in terms of this particular linguistic feature, most of its users do fit the new speaker stereotype.

The analysis of the lexicon, however, shows that Facebook users employ considerable variation with regard to the use of borrowings and neologisms, sometimes not exhibiting the attributes we might expect of new speakers in their use of non-officially advised borrowings, while at other times taking a more purist approach than even the official standard. While OPAB relies on standard vocabulary – unsurprisingly as it is the arbiter

of that standard – Facebook users employ multiple practices with the result that their lexicon is particularly diverse. This again relates to the heteroglossic nature of this context, but also shows that users of Breton on Facebook engage with the language in multiple ways that show a complex relationship with the language that does not always match expectations. Instead of assuming that new speakers form a homogeneous *néo-bretonnant* community, we should be receptive to the idea that many of them will diverge from the linguistic traits expected. While this study has observed such divergence in the specific context of Facebook, its occurrence raises questions around speaker practices in other domains: those used to communicating with others who may have different backgrounds and different beliefs about the role of Breton, manifesting themselves in diverse linguistic repertoires, may find themselves at ease with navigating a wider speaker community in other spaces including the offline context. Further study is required to discern the potential effects of this mediatisation process (see Androutsopoulos 2016; Introduction, this volume).

In answer to this chapter's first research question, which asks whether the online context can be considered a new speaker community in terms of whether it conforms with the linguistic characteristics that we would expect of typical new speakers, we can conclude that a diversity of practices can be observed and that while the community may be made up of a majority of new speakers according to other characteristics such as greater access to technology and willingness to use Breton outside intimate contexts, this does not necessarily result in a "new speaker community" in the sense of a community whose linguistic production is restricted to stereotypically *néo-bretonnant* forms. Indeed, as shown in the way Facebook users bring in dialectal features, the expression of identity takes an important role, and it is perhaps this that we should associate with new speakers of Breton more than any specific linguistic characteristics, given that identity construction has previously been identified as a primary motivation among new speakers (Nance et al. 2016).

This brings us to the second research question, which asked how users of Breton in online contexts are able to balance communication with the expression of identity: the different functions and authorships of the websites in question are also important here. In the case of OPAB, the text is presented on behalf of a public body, while on *loeizherrieu.fr*, it represents the amateur enthusiasm of one or more anonymous members of the Breton-speaking community for Loeiz Herrieu's writing; the roles played by contributors to these sites are sharply differentiated from each other. On *Facebook e brezhoneg!*, the balance between identity and communication is carefully struck in the use of minor orthographic adaptations to convey allegiance to specific dialects, while the ludic and metalinguistic qualities of much of the language used show that users of the site are acting as private individuals, using language in a more familiar and relaxed way than would be appropriate in the other contexts examined. Therefore, it would be incorrect to assume that contributors to OPAB's website are set apart from other speakers by their use of a more standard linguistic variety; instead, we should consider the possibility that they use standard language in this official context but may not always do so elsewhere. The specific role of each online setting and the capacity in which speakers use language clearly have an effect on the linguistic results, and different speakers are able to employ different registers and styles of language in different situations. The proliferation of different choices around vocabulary on *Facebook e brezhoneg!* speaks to the fact that new speakers of Breton have complex, multifaceted identities, and, depending on the interaction, they can use language in various ways so as to bring out the aspect of their identity that is most salient.

This chapter's discussion of online uses of Breton has shown that it would be incorrect to assume that all users of Breton in these contexts are stereotypical *néo-bretonnants* who favour the standard language and the neologisms that may be associated with it. Either there are more traditional speakers using the internet than we are told, or a significant number of new speakers do not conform to the linguistic stereotypes they have been assigned. Either way, categorising Breton speakers according to a binary division and assuming that all of them meet a number of associated criteria would seem to be an oversimplification, failing to acknowledge that there are a number of potential motivations and ideologies that may underpin the Breton revitalisation movement, which may indeed be heightened by the possibilities provided by the internet (see Kelly-Holmes, this volume). Instead of assuming that online settings are populated by a community of stereotypical new speakers, we should recognise the complexity of Breton use in these contexts and support the continued growth of a diverse community of speakers who use Breton for various reasons and in various ways, making use of the opportunities provided by the internet to overcome some of the drawbacks of being a small,

geographically diffuse community. The availability of these online contexts can enable speakers to minimise these practical difficulties, but it should not lead researchers to perpetuate oversimplified and outdated stereotypes.

Notes

(1) This chapter uses Breton names in preference over French where appropriate. For the names of dialects and languages, it follows the Breton rule of using the suffix *-ek* where these occur adjectivally, and *-eg* where they are used as nouns or in conjunction with the word *language/dialect*.

(2) The administrative region of Brittany comprises four departments, but a fifth, Loire-Atlantique, is part of the historical region, contributes to financing the Breton language office, and is typically recognised as part of Brittany by Breton speakers.

(3) <https://www.bretagne.bzh/br>, accessed 5 January 2023.

(4) See <http://indigenoustweets.com>, accessed 27 October 2021.

(5) <https://www.facebook.com/groups/334727793245979>, last accessed 4 January 2023.

(6) See <http://www.ouest-france.fr/high-tech/facebook-un-francais-sur-deux-actif-sur-le-reseau-3653032>, accessed 24 January 2017.

(7) See <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10208135488737208>, accessed 4 January 2023.

(8) See <https://tei-c.org>, accessed 1 November 2021.

(9) See <https://www.brezhoneg.bzh/163-bureviou.htm>, accessed 27 October 2021.

(10) <https://www.brezhoneg.bzh/87-termofis.htm>, accessed 4 January 2023.

(11) <https://www.brezhoneg.bzh/91-kerofis.htm>, accessed 4 January 2023.

(12) See <https://www.brezhoneg.bzh/69-trein.htm>, accessed 1 November 2021.

(13) See <https://www.brezhoneg.bzh/177-divizou-hag-erbedadennou-ar-chuzul-skiantel.htm>, accessed 1 November 2021.

(14) See <https://www.brezhoneg.bzh/89-forom-termenadurezh.htm>, accessed 11 April 2022.

(15) See <https://www.brezhoneg.bzh/55-istor.htm>, accessed 1 November 2021.

(16) See <https://www.brezhoneg.bzh/54-ar-brezhoneg.htm>, accessed 1 November 2021.

(17) See <https://www.brezhoneg.bzh/55-istor.htm>, accessed 1 November 2021.

(18) See <https://www.brezhoneg.bzh/69-trein.htm>, accessed 27 October 2021.

(19) See <https://www.youtube.com/c/BrezhonegBew/videos>, accessed 27 October 2021.

(20) <http://loeizherrieu.fr>, last accessed 4 January 2023.

(21) See <http://loeizherrieu.fr/www/tests/biographie.html>, accessed 1 November 2021.

(22) See <http://loeizherrieu.fr/www/tests/ressources.html>, accessed 1 November 2021.

(23) See the discussion of *néo-bretonnants* in the introduction to this chapter for a list of works that invoke this distinction between new and traditional speakers of Breton.

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