



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

Breton and Cornish studies: language, linguistics, and literature

Davies-Deacon, M. (2025). Breton and Cornish studies: language, linguistics, and literature. *The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies*, 85(1), 341–345. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22224297-08501015>

Published in:

The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights

Copyright 2025 the authors.

This is an open access article published under a Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the author and source are cited.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Open Access

This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: <http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback>



BRILL

THE YEAR'S WORK IN MODERN
LANGUAGE STUDIES 85 (2025) 341–345

The Year's Work in
Modern Language
Studies
brill.com/ywml

II

Breton and Cornish Studies



Language, Linguistics, and Literature

Merryn Davies-Deacon

Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK

Breton

2023 saw the publication of the first of two planned special issues of *Studia Celto-Slavica*, containing papers on aspects of Breton language and history based on lectures delivered as part of the University of Western Brittany (Université de Bretagne occidentale, UBO)'s annual summer school on Breton language and culture since 2015. This brings recent research on core aspects of Breton studies, conducted by academics affiliated with the UBO, to an English-speaking readership, reflecting the summer school's goal of providing Breton-learning opportunities for researchers unfamiliar with French. In this first volume, contributions on the subject of language focus on literature and on folklore collectors. Nelly Blanchard, 'La Villemarqué's *Barzaz-Breiz* (1839–1845–1867): A Romantic Fiction to Reinvent Oneself', *Studia Celto-Slavica*, 13 (2023), 85–100, takes up the debate around the authenticity of the *Barzaz-Breiz*, arguing that its compiler, La Villemarqué, must be considered the author of the text rather than merely a collector; in centring himself in the text, La Villemarqué transforms it into a work of fiction, constructing a nationalist, Romantic view of Brittany and its people. Fañch Postic, 'Oral Literature in Brittany: A Short History of Breton Collections and Collectors', *Studia Celto-Slavica*, 13 (2023), 73–83, places La Villemarqué in a broader context, discussing collectors of popular Breton literature and showing how different trends and political currents have motivated changes in the collection of folklore over

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/22224297-08501015

© MERRYN DAVIES-DEACON, 2025 | ISSN: 0084-4152 (print) 2222-4297 (online)

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.

time. Ronan Calvez, 'Breton Literature between the 16th and 17th Centuries: The Work of Artisans', *Studia Celto-Slavica*, 13 (2023), 59–73, focuses on written literature from the late Middle Breton period, providing a list of sacred and secular works, illustrating the complex metrical rules and internal rhyme schemes employed, and analysing the importance of death as a theme in much of this material, which links this literary output to the visual arts of the time. Mannaig Thomas, '100 Years of Literature in the Breton Language (1920–2020)', *Studia Celto-Slavica*, 13 (2023), 101–115, shifts the focus forward to the modern period, noting that while the number of Breton speakers has declined, the appearance of new publications has increased, initially stemming from militant movements such as *Gwalarn* but since expanding to encompass a broader range of ideological positions, with both original literary works and translations latterly encouraged by opportunities for official financial support for new publications.

The focus on literature recurs in Heather Williams, 'For a Welsh French Studies: Breton Poets "Writing to Wales"', *French Studies Bulletin*, 44 (2023), 63–66, a short contribution that underlines the importance of periphery in literary studies. Noting the Breton tradition of looking to Wales, Williams advocates the merits of recentring the discipline of French Studies away from its traditional, colonial centre of Paris. George Wilson, 'A Comparative Study of Regional-Language Immersion Education in Brittany and Wales', *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 24 (2023), 418–439, also draws on Brittany's link with Wales. Analysing the provisions made for immersion education in both jurisdictions, Wilson shows that Brittany is comparatively under-resourced: planning mechanisms are less robust, fewer children are exposed to Breton at an early age, and there are difficulties in training enough teachers and in providing a sufficient range of pedagogical materials. The involvement of central French government in many of the associated processes causes difficulties that do not arise in the Welsh context; political support for these immersion projects is crucial in assuring their sustainability. While Williams' and Wilson's fields are different, both publications attest to the importance of Wales as a traditional model for Breton speakers and activists.

Gildas Grimault, 'Est-il préférable d'apprendre les langues minoritaires à l'âge adulte? L'exemple du breton', *Lengas*, 93 (2023), also examines Breton teaching, but argues that insufficient attention has been paid to adult education in previous research. While the implementation and expansion of Breton immersion education was subject to political struggles (still ongoing in the 2020s, as seen in the polemic over the 2021 *loi Molac*), adult education has occurred on a voluntary basis and hence has not attracted such attention and controversy. However, Grimault points out that while the education of children

through Breton reaches a larger audience, these pupils in many cases do not continue to use Breton in their adult life; on the other hand, adults who make the conscious decision to learn Breton themselves are more likely to complete their trajectory as a learner and continue using the language. Grimault argues that, given that the spread of Breton to more speakers relies on more than just linguistic ability, the importance of adult-focused learning pathways has been overlooked.

The linguistic effects of learning Breton through formal means (in both immersion and adult education) are examined in Myrzinn Boucher-Durand, 'Memestra eget: Non-Standard Use of Prepositions from Second-Language Learners in Modern Breton', *North American Journal of Celtic Studies*, 7 (2023), 116–145. Using a French–Breton translation exercise, Boucher-Durand investigated the use of prepositions, finding that many participants who had learnt the language through formal education, and particularly those who acquired it from second-language speakers, exhibited non-traditional syntactic features, a sign of influence from French and language attrition. Due to the small size of the language community, Boucher-Durand suggests, the use of non-standard prepositions by a small number of non-native-speaker teachers can have a disproportionate effect, allowing these usages to spread quickly to subsequent generations of speakers. Gary Manchec-German, 'Standardisation, Prescriptivism and Diglossia: How Acceptable is Normalised Breton to Native Speakers?', in *The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Prescriptivism*, ed. by Joan C. Beal, Morana Lukač, and Robin Straaijer (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 405–426, also addresses the issue of divergent uses between traditional and new speakers, providing an account of the development of the modern normative variety, which he terms the 'New Breton Secular Standard', along with a typology of traditional speakers that allows for more nuance when discussing their use of and attitudes towards Breton. Arguing that the current situation can be characterized using a diglossic framework involving various registers and dialects of Breton as well as French, Manchec-German suggests that didactic approaches should compromise in their selection of linguistic features to ensure maximum comprehensibility for all speakers.

Michael Hornsby and Geoffrey Roger, 'The Hierarchisation of Regional Languages in the Linguistic Landscape of Brittany', in *Linguistic Minorities in Europe Online*, ed. by Lenore Grenoble, Pia Lane, and Unne Røyneland (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), turns to the linguistic landscape with a comparison of Breton and Gallo in eastern Brittany, showing that Breton is routinely prioritized over Gallo in public signage. The commuters they interview appear to support this hierarchization, believing Breton to be more appropriate as an emblem of Brittany as a whole. Cédric Choplin, 'Comment la charte 'Ya d'ar brezhoneg' est

devenue un outil incontournable de la revitalisation et de la normalisation de la langue bretonne', *Lengas*, 93 (2023), also considers the linguistic landscape in its discussion of the *Ya d'ar brezhoneg* certification available to businesses and municipalities, noting how the scheme has evolved in tandem with the officialization of the Breton language office and the increased formalization of language policy.

Erwan Hupel and Herve Le Bihan, 'Comment avoir le dernier mot? Variation, diffusion et légitimation des néologismes en breton', *Neologica*, 17 (2023), 23–45, also considers the work of the Breton language office as part of a discussion of neologisms in Breton. Using the example of terms used for 'lockdown' during the initial phases of the Covid-19 pandemic, Hupel and Le Bihan discuss how terms were disseminated and argue that the lack of official discourse in Breton can make it difficult to establish recommended lexis. In many examples, speakers used doublets to ensure maximum comprehension, following (whether deliberately or not) Manchee-German's recommendation that the language used should be inclusive. Mélanie Joutteau, 'A Survey of Expressive Words in Breton', in *Expressivity in European languages*, ed. by Jeffrey P. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 295–310, considers lexis with a focus on the rich system of Breton expressive words, such as onomatopoeic terms, interjections, and other discourse markers. Joutteau examines the typical structural properties of these words, including reduplication and vowel alternation, and notes common syllabic patterns, providing comparison with other languages.

Mélanie Joutteau and Reun Bideault, 'Outils numériques et traitement automatique du breton', in *Langues régionales de France: nouvelles approches, nouvelles méthodologies, revitalisation*, ed. by Annie Riolland and Michela Russo (Paris: Éditions de la Société de linguistique de Paris, 2023), pp. 37–74, lists the existing corpora and natural language processing tools developed for Breton, and provides a more detailed description of Arbres (<https://arbres.iker.cnrs.fr>), Joutteau's database of Breton syntax, exploring how the latter can be used as a source of data for computational projects. Breton is one of four languages considered in Michela Lorandi and Anya Belz, 'Data-to-Text Generation for Severely Under-Resourced Languages with GPT-3.5: A Bit of Help Needed from Google Translate', in *Proceedings of the workshop on Multimodal, Multilingual Natural Language Generation and multilingual WebNLG challenge (MM-NLG 2023)*, ed. by Albert Gatt et al. (Prague: Association for Computational Linguistics, 2023), pp. 80–86, which concludes that large language models achieve better performance by generating sentences in English and then translating them using Google Translate than by generating them in the target language directly.

Cornish

Katy C. Humberstone and Kensa Broadhurst, 'Cornish', in *Linguistic Minorities in Europe Online*, ed. by Lenore Grenoble, Pia Lane, and Unne Røyneland (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), provides a welcome up-to-date summary of the current position of Cornish, including information on demographics, status, and the presence of Cornish in education and the media, as well as some data from recent studies of language attitudes. In Katy C. Humberstone and Adam Kubik, "Celtic Meets Slavic': The Social Sustainability of Cornish and Silesian Heritage in Europe and Overseas', *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 22 (2023), 1–31, some of these themes are explored more critically, with discussion of the challenges facing the production of Cornish-language media for learners, attitudes towards the commodification of Cornish language and culture, and the importance of Cornish traditions in the diaspora, with a focus on Mexico. The comparison with Silesian highlights the importance of cross-European initiatives and the effects of globalization, both positive and negative.

Sacrament an Alter/The Sacrament of the Altar: A Critical Edition with Translation (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2023), ed. by D. H. Frost, provides the first critical edition of this important Tudor Cornish text, containing a transcription, translation, commentary, and a detailed introduction that explains the context of the text's production. The clear presentation of the text facilitates understanding while enabling access to the layout and contents of the original manuscript. An extended review, Anthony Harvey, 'Language and Religion in Tudor Cornwall: The Testimony of *Sacrament an Alter*', *Studia Celtica Posnaniensia*, 8 (2023), 55–68, furnishes further contextual information on Frost's work while arguing that the use of English lexis in the text can be characterized as code-switching, and assesses the impact of the Reformation on the decline of Cornish. As Harvey points out, Frost is uniquely qualified to produce this edition due to expertise in both traditional Cornish and the theological context in which the manuscript was produced. Frost's work is the first volume in University of Exeter Press's *1,000 Years of Cornish* series, which aims to publish similar editions of all traditional Cornish texts, potentially allowing for major advances in scholarship on Cornish. It is to be hoped that both this series and the comparable *Corpus Textuum Cornicorum* published by Everttype (see *YWMLS* 82) achieve their goals.