Brittany / Breizh / Bretagne / Bertègn

Having undergone intense government discrimination, followed by a brutal transmission shut-down, Brittany's indigenous languages are tardily being revived in education and public space. This has gone some way towards reversing sociolinguistic stigmas, but has so far failed to reverse language shift.



Brittany is home to the only extant Celtic language on mainland Europe: brezhoneg a.k.a Breton. As part of the Gallo-Brittonic subgroup, it is closely related to Kernewek (Cornish) and Cymraeg (Welsh). Despite its iconic role in shaping Bretons' distinct cultural identity, brezhoneg has long been dominated by Gallo-Romance, pushing from the east with an increasing share of Gallo and standardised French speakers. The highest number of Breton speakers recorded was in 1886, with just under 2 million people – 59 percent of the total population. This figure has shrunk considerably since then, and is currently estimated at around 200,000 predominantly elderly speakers, much similar to Gallo whose speakers have massively shifted to French after WW2.

Brittany was forcibly annexed by France in 1532. Its province and parliament were dissolved altogether by French revolutionaries in 1789, resurfacing only as late as in 1974 in the shape of a Regional Council with severely limited jurisdiction and budget compared to its European counterparts (under 2 billion euros in 2022). As a result of this so-called decentralisation reform, one fifth of Brittany's population and territory have been partitioned off, including its historic ducal residence and prime economic centre Nantes, henceforth administered by a distinct Regional Council (Pays de la Loire). Like other minoritised language communities under French rule, Breton and Gallo speakers have suffered intense government discrimination. French has been enforced as the exclusive language of:

- court decisions (1620 onwards)
- administrative records (1794 onwards)
- forenames in civil registry (1803-1966)
- road signs (1835-1977 for Breton, onwards for Gallo)
- compulsory schooling (1881-1982 for Breton, onwards for Gallo)
- preaching and catechism in the Catholic Church (1890-1905)
- graphemes in civil registry outlawing diacritics ã, á, í, ì, ñ, ò (1966 onwards + declared unconstitutional in 2021)
- 'the French Republic' as 'a fundamental component of France's identity and heritage' (1992 onwards)
- 'teaching, work, commercial exchanges and public services' (1994 onwards)

The humiliation of generations of speakers, as part of an explicit eradication campaign against their languages, ultimately led to parents no longer transmitting Breton and Gallo from the early 1950s – much like other minoritised language communities in metropolitan France. Since then both Breton and Gallo have brutally shifted to post-vernacular usage, which has coincided with a dramatic surge of suicides and alcoholism in the west.

Since the late 1970s, progress towards revitalising Brittany's indigenous languages has been significant for Breton but limited for Gallo, still perceived by many as a substandard deviation from French. In 1982 a Breton-French curriculum finally came to be offered in a few State schools, after activists had successfully set up Breton-medium skolioù kevredigezhel as part of the Diwan network established in 1977. Although Breton-medium education has experienced a phenomenal and sustained growth ever since, it only caters for about 3 percent of pupils where popular demand is estimated at 32.5 percent. Demand is often higher in eastern Brittany, where indigenous Gallo is taught in far fewer schools, and only as a subject as opposed to a language of instruction.





Nowadays Breton is taught to just under 20,000 students across all of historic Brittany. The Diwan network champions full immersion in Breton until the age of 7-8 (introducing French thereafter), and caters for over 20 percent of this cohort. The remnant are taught in fully bilingual curricula: Div yezh (State schools – 52 percent) and Divaskell (Catholic/private – 28 percent). As of 2022-2023 age groups are distributed as follows:

- 3-6 y/o: 37 percent
- 6-11 y/o: 48 percent
- 11-15 y/o: 14 percent
- 15-18 y/o: 3 percent

These figures are symptomatic of the inadequate provision of teacher training by the French Ministry of Education, which has generated an endemic shortage of Breton-medium teachers – aggravated at secondary level. As in other regional language communities in France, this has meant that most primary school pupils must give up on bilingual tuition at secondary level, with a devastating impact on both proficiency and transmission. Diwan's immersive model has proven much stronger at producing proficient speakers, and retaining more of them at secondary level - but has recently come under attack by the French Constitutional Council, which in 2021 declared minority-language immersion unconstitutional. This decision has caused outrage, followed by awkward de-escalation by the Ministry of Education, leaving this constitutional threat fully pending nonetheless.

In Brittany as elsewhere, visibility in public space has been an essential factor in language revitalisation. While Gallo has only recently made a symbolic entrance in institutional branding, Breton has enjoyed more established visibility in official signage and communication, yet has re-

mained damagingly scarce in the media for lack of a dedicated public radio station or TV channel. Obstacles to the promotion of Breton in education and public space have been many, however the long-standing sociolinguistic stigma appears to have been securely reversed. The fact that a majority of Bretons now report shame for not being able to speak it is encouraging in itself, but far from enough to reverse language shift. Breton needs to spread outside classrooms, which requires heavy investment in the offer of extra-curricular activities for children and adults.



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