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ASMCF Peter Morris Memorial Postgraduate Travel Prize Report

Research Trip: PhD Fieldwork in Brittany, France, May-July 2022

Sociolinguistic studies on regional and minority languages have become increasingly topical in recent decades, particularly in response to growing awareness of social and linguistic diversity within societies. France in particular is home to many regional languages which pre-date Standard French—such as Breton, a Brythonic Celtic language—as well as minority languages like Arabic, which have come to the country more recently via immigration and are passed on to subsequent French-born generations through familial transmission. French government language policy favoring monolingualism in French has historically led to and continues to perpetuate the marginalization of regional and minority languages. However, many regional languages have begun processes of revitalization – e.g., through the establishment of immersion schools (Adam 2020), or more militant efforts such as protests and marches – while efforts have also been made toward including minority languages like Arabic as foreign language options in schools (Soriano 2019).

My PhD research has been developed to present an exploratory comparative analysis of the Breton- and Arabic-speaking communities in Brittany, particularly as most research to date has focused exclusively on either regional languages or minority languages. Through semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire exploring concepts such as social experiences, identity, and attitudes in relation to language, I seek to shed light on how these issues shape the sociolinguistic landscape of Brittany, and France more broadly.

The first research method is comprised of an online questionnaire in two versions (one for Breton and one for Arabic) and has been distributed to language users across France. I am currently in the process of collecting and analyzing responses.

My second research method took the form of semi-structured interviews conducted with Breton and Arabic language users (a term I have selected over ‘speakers’ in order to encompass all practices and proficiency levels) across Brittany during eleven weeks of fieldwork. This was made possible by gracious funding from ASMCF, which helped cover some of the costs of my accommodation and trains. I spent one week in Nantes – a diverse city that, although administratively no longer part of Brittany, is historically considered part of the region and is a hub for Breton language revitalization – and ten weeks in Rennes, the vibrant capital of Brittany and an even greater hub of Breton revitalization and diversity. I also occasionally travelled to cities such as St-Brieuc and Guingamp for interviews and cultural events. In total, I conducted interviews with 29 Arabic language users and 27 Breton language users, with a generally equal distribution of age groups between 16 and 65+. The majority of Breton language users have learned or studied Breton in school or in adulthood, and only three learned the language at home. The vast majority of Arabic language users, on the other hand, have grown up speaking the language, although it must be noted that most individuals speak a particular dialect, such as Moroccan Arabic or *darija*, while Classical or Standard Arabic is generally learned in school or at cultural/religious associations (see Caubet 2007, 2008). Individuals’ language practices and social experiences varied greatly, as well as their attitudes toward government language policy and language education, and their degrees of optimism/pessimism toward their respective language’s future in France. Nevertheless, my interview participants shared rich insights and personal reflections, providing a wealth of data to explore.

I have just begun the earliest stages of data analysis, although some preliminary themes and comparisons have arisen already, such as a tendency for users of both languages to employ the word *richesse* (‘richness’) to describe their feelings toward their multilingualism. A particularly surprising overlap occurred when I attended several events at an Algerian cultural association and met and interviewed individuals from the Kabylie region, who compared the situation of the indigenous Kabyle language in Algeria to that of Breton in Brittany, and found solidarity with their Breton neighbors and a mutual desire to support linguistic and cultural diversity in both countries. The experience of interviewing such a range of individuals and collecting their fascinating stories was rewarding and exciting, and I look forward to cross-analyzing the data alongside the questionnaire results.