

How collaboration between Celtic language communities has improved

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1 Introduction

This abstract outlines how members of various fragmented Celtic language communities have, over the last few years, improved inter-community collaboration. This collaboration has manifested itself in quite a diverse way. In particular, this abstract focuses on the improved collaboration between the Welsh and Breton language technology communities.

2 Historical Context

The legislative frameworks for minority language support in the United Kingdom and France are marked by both differences and striking commonalities. In the United Kingdom, a decentralised strategy is taking front stage. The Welsh Language Act 1993 gives Welsh equal status in Wales to English, regulating its use in public services and education. Scottish Gaelic¹, Irish², and Ulster Scots² are governed by similar Acts, but with differing degrees of legal weight. Cornish, Scots and others enjoy some protections through the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages to which the United Kingdom is a signatory.

In contrast, France takes a centralised, assimilationist posture. The single official language is French, and the Toubon Law³ (1994) prohibits the use of regional languages in government sectors. However, there are exceptions for certain languages such as Breton and Corsican, which allow for limited signage and bilingual education programmes.

Despite their opposing perspectives, both countries confront similar issues. Funding for minority language efforts is frequently insufficient, and enforcement measures might be lax. Furthermore, balancing linguistic rights with national unity remains a delicate subject.

The best legislative framework for minority language assistance is likely to be somewhere between the decentralised model of the United Kingdom and

¹Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005

²Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022

³Loi n° 94-665 du 4 août 1994 relative à l'emploi de la langue française

the centralised one of France. Finding the correct balance between preserving linguistic variety and creating national cohesiveness is a delicate dance that both nations are still doing with various degrees of success.

Though geographically adjacent, the landscapes of minority language support in the UK and France offer opposing visions. Understanding cultural disparities is critical for negotiating the difficult terrain of language revival.

In the United Kingdom, a decentralised method is used. Language policy is frequently influenced by individual areas, such as Wales' Senedd and Scotland's Gaelic Language Act. This promotes a sense of local ownership and cultural sovereignty, encouraging communities to advocate for their languages through specialised organisations and resources. This haphazard approach, however, may result in discrepancies in support and financing among areas.

France, on the other hand, follows a top-down, centralist strategy. French is firmly established as the official language, while minority languages such as Breton have seen historical repression. While there has been a surge in recognition and language charters in recent decades, support is frequently restricted and related to the national agenda. This can breed animosity and impede true community involvement.

Both countries provide useful lessons. The localised focus of the United Kingdom creates community ownership, but France's centralised resources can facilitate implementation. A mixed strategy that tailors support to the individual needs and goals of each minority language group, striking a careful balance between local empowerment and national coherence, is the best way forward.

These various methods reflect a variety of historical and cultural circumstances. The lengthy history of regional autonomy in the United Kingdom influences its decentralised model, whereas the republican goal of linguistic unity in France supports its centralist one. Recognising these distinctions is critical for developing successful language assistance programmes that balance national unity and cultural diversity.

Despite being separated by a small channel, the linguistic landscapes of the United Kingdom and France provide different stories for their respective minority languages, Welsh and Breton. While both confront the issues of falling speaker numbers and competition from dominant languages, their methods to seeking help have diverged.

In the United Kingdom, Welsh had a national renaissance in the late twentieth century. The Welsh Language Act 1993 cleared the door for bilingual education, media coverage, and government financing for language development. This centralised strategy, although not without criticism, created unity and increased Welsh's prominence in public life. Breton, on the other hand, must navigate a more difficult context within France. Despite being designated as a "regional language", its formal use is minimal, and centralised backing is inconsistent. The French approach emphasises local initiatives, putting regional governments and communities in charge of advocating for Breton. While this decentralised strategy empowers local voices, it can also result in unequal support and a lack of national coherence.

These varied pathways reflect deeper variations in the approaches to lan-

guage policy in the two nations. The centralised approach of the United Kingdom, with its emphasis on top-down involvement, has been criticised for being bureaucratic and ignoring regional differences. While encouraging local autonomy, France’s decentralised strategy might fail to offer continuous assistance and overcome persistent language inequalities.

The success of any minority language revitalisation attempt is dependent on a careful mix of national and local support. In this sense, both Wales and Brittany provide excellent lessons, demonstrating the necessity of specialised language regulations, vigorous community engagement, and creative technical solutions. Both islands can navigate the turbulent waters of language revitalisation and assure a bright future for their treasured languages by learning from each other’s experiences.

3 Current Research and Collaboration

Canolfan Bedwyr’s contributions to Welsh voice-to-text, text-to-speech, and automated speech recognition (ASR) have been transformative. Tools such as “Trawsgrifiwr” (Jones, 2022) smoothly transcribe audio, while “Macsen” (Jones, 2020), the first Welsh-speaking virtual assistant, takes the language into households. These breakthroughs are more than just technological achievements; they are cultural lifelines, reviving Welsh and laying the door for Breton to follow suit.

Minority languages struggle to survive amid a sea of dominance over Europe’s linguistic landscape. Breton, which is spoken by around 200,000 people in France (Région Bretagne, 2018), confronts comparable issues. Breton-language technology is difficult to get, limiting its application in education, media, and everyday life.

Canolfan Bedwyr’s study is more than just transportable; it serves as a model for teamwork. Breton linguists may collaborate with their Welsh colleagues, sharing data, developing algorithms, and adjusting resources to their language’s special requirements. This cross-border communication has the potential to accelerate Breton’s technology advancement by overcoming the digital gap and empowering its speakers.

Minority languages, such as Breton, may recover their due position in the digital era via shared expertise, open-source technologies, and a comprehensive grasp of cultural context.

However, technology alone cannot bring a language back to life. The key is community involvement. Breton cultural organisations, schools, and daily speakers must collaborate with linguists and technology. Local communities become the driving force behind their language’s digital revival by contributing data, testing technologies, and pushing for their adoption.

Better social links have been established between the communities in an attempt to foster better collaboration and less formal idea-sharing. This came about with the creation of the Celtic Language Technology Forum Discord Server. Before the Discord server, there was a Celtic Language Technology

Interest Group email list. While this has proved a valuable resource, it was too formal to encourage the sort of community building that members wanted.

Interestingly, Discord has become quite important for various Celtic Language communities, especially during and after the pandemic. There has been an explosion of Celtic language-learning groups which has resulted in spin-out servers including several language technology servers for individual Celtic languages and a Celtic Language Minecraft server. The Minecraft server was an interesting experiment. Members from various language-learning communities came together to build small tribes and villages for the different Celtic Languages. This proved valuable for many during the pandemic.

The issues faced by these communities and languages differ significantly. This can be seen in the number of speakers, the legal recognition, and the resources available for each language. For example, according to the 2021 United Kingdom Census (Office for National Statistics, 2022), the number of people who can speak Welsh is estimated to be around 538,300 while the number of people who can speak Cornish is only about 563. Despite this, the various communities have a lot in common, especially culturally, and this has allowed the various communities to come together.

4 Outcomes

Our experience with this language collaboration has been both humbling and eye-opening. We've discovered several critical principles that apply to comparable endeavours, providing a road map for navigating the various landscapes of revitalising minority languages.

To begin, we discovered the hard way that linguistic kinship does not imply technical twins. Though our partner language shared ancestral origins, its peculiarities necessitated tailor-made solutions. One-size-fits-all techniques will simply not suffice. This emphasised the significance of tailoring technology to the individual characteristics of each language, similar to how a tailor shapes a garment to its person.

Second, we were pleasantly surprised by technology's democratisation. Setting up the infrastructure for our partner language proved to be unexpectedly low-cost and simple. Existing open-source technologies and widely available knowledge proved impactful, illustrating that creating foundational technology does not have to be expensive to be effective.

Finally, the influence of technology on language usage and perception was amply demonstrated. It was encouraging to see our products smoothly fit into everyday life, from informal talks to official situations. It validated our idea that technology may be a strong catalyst for changing people's linguistic attitudes and pushing them to appreciate their mother tongue.

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