

CONSONANT MUTATION IN MODERN BRETON

(Summary of a paper read to the Linguistic Society of New Zealand on 27 July, 1959)

The Breton language is one of the Indo-European family of Celtic. It is closely akin to Welsh and Cornish, the original speakers having been pushed out of Britain, mainly from Devon and Cornwall, into the Gallo-Roman province of Armorica.

Of the two main dialectical groups of Brittany, the northern or K-L-T, spoken in Leon, Tregor and French Cornwall is derived from Great Britain, but the second main group, that of Vannes and the Morbihan has been clearly demonstrated by Professor Falc'hun and Dr. Trépos of the University of Rennes to be a mixture of predominantly northern dialects on a sub-stratum of what to appears to be a Gaulish dialect.

Numerically, Breton is predominant over the other Celtic languages, there being approximately 100,000 native speakers of Welsh, Irish and Scots Gaelic and 1,000,000 native speakers of Breton. Over the years the Breton language has developed freely in a country where the official language has for a long time been French. The net result is that there are a number of dialects and sub-dialects with a grammatical flexibility that is astonishing. There is a certain basis which is common to all the dialects and a tolerance of deviant forms from a speaker of another dialect. As a result of the official attitude to Breton the majority of speakers cannot read or write their language with any ease.

Before going on to the everyday mutations in the language I would like to dwell for a moment on the historical mutations from original Indo-European. Without going into details the historical consonant mutations are:

1. qu has become Celtic p.
e.g. pemp (five) corresponds to Latin quinque
2. The primitive p has fallen.
e.g. leun (full) corresponds to Latin plenus
3. S has become h.
e.g. heul (sun) corresponds to Latin sol
4. Celtic z corresponds to pt, kt, tt in other languages.
e.g. kaez (poor man) corresponds to Latin captus

These historical mutations are of course complex phenomena having been produced by evolution over a series of stages and are different from the living mutations of modern Breton. A profound study of these latter has helped in understanding the

historical mutations of other Indo-European languages by showing some of the reasons why, and how the evolution of languages took place.

Living Mutations in Breton.

A Breton speaker makes the mutations in changing the initial consonant of a word, completely unconsciously, because of the preceding word, and if that word is a noun or has a certain gender or number. So that after the possessive he will say: ho penn - your head; e benn - his head; ma venn - my head.

Before considering the mutations themselves it is as well to consider the following tables of the consonants in Breton.

Aspirated Occlusives	pf	ts	k	c'h
Unvoiced Occlusives	p	t	k	
Unvoiced Aspirants	f	s	c'h	ch
Voiced Occlusives	b	d	g	
Voiced Spirants	v	z	h	j

l, m, n, r are liquids.

Table of Breton Mutations. (Capital letters show mutable consonants)

1. Mutations by weakening -- the most common and affecting all the mutable consonants:

↓ P	T	K	B	D	G	M	S	Ch	
b	d	g	v	z	h	-	v	z	j

2. Mutation by strengthening -- affects only the voiced occlusives which become unvoiced:

p	t	k
↑ B	D	G

3. Mutation by aspiration -- affecting only unvoiced occlusives:

f	s	c'h	(pf)	(ts)	(kc'h)
V	Z	H	P	T	K

An overall table would be as follows:

				p	t	k						
			↓ P	T	K	↑ B	D	G	M	S	Ch	
↓ f	s	c'h	b	d	h	v	z	h	-	v	z	j
v	z	h										

weakening ↓
strengthening ↑

Mixed Mutations.

Those produced by the verbal particles e (middle Breton ez),

o (middle Breton oz); and the conjunction ma (my) (Middle Breton ma, ez, maz). These weaken B, G, M, to v, h, v.

	t		
	↑		
B,	D,	G,	M
↓		↓	↓
v		h	v

but strengthen D to t.

Note: There are other mutations which are not noted in writing but which can be heard quite easily, that is of the liquids l, r, n. e.g. he lod, e llod (cf. Welsh ll); he rod, e rhod (cf. Welsh rh) he nadoz, e nnadoz.

Reasons for the Mutations.

A. Phonetic Reasons for Weakening:

1. When passing from a strong buccal pressure to a weak pressure. That is to say from a vowel or a liquid to consonant there is weakening of the consonant. E.g. me a peg which obliges a change from a weak pressure of the a to the strong pressure necessary for pe, a vocal gymnastic is necessary, so that the p becomes b and we have me a beg. This is then a mutation to accommodate the vowel, i.e. a vowel weakens a consonant.

2. A relatively strong breath is needed to produce f, c'h, v, z, h. A brusque occlusion is necessary when these are followed by the unvoiced b, d, g and the air is not freed except for the following vowels so that b, d, g, become p, t, k. e.g. kreiz deiz, kreiz teiz (midday). At the same time in preparing to pronounce two consonants z and d the pressure has mounted so that the vocal cords cannot vibrate and the vibrations are stopped after krei- with the result that two unvoiced consonants are produced, e.g. kreisteiz. Equally, two consecutive voiced consonants become unvoiced, e.g. lagad du becomes lagathu (dark eyes).

3. Mutations are most easily produced after a palatal, i.e. when the buccal cavity is reduced to its minimum by the tongue against the palate and consequently pressure is great. This explains certain peculiarities of Breton mutations, e.g. merc'h gaer is merc'h kaer; eur vas teo for eur vaz deo (big stick); eun ilis fihan for eun iliz vihan. (from teo and bihan).

4. Some apparent mutations are produced without reason, e.g. ho preur for ho breur but ho was formerly hoz which still produces the mutation. Even though the fall of a consonant has left a vowel or the fall of a vowel has left a consonant, the mutation is still produced because the pattern has already been set.

5. Certain words produce mutation by weakening. There are many of these but only a few examples are given: a, aba, ad-, am-, ar-, berr, hanter, he-, gour-, rann, etc. Some of these words are particles, other nouns or adjectives. Many of these only

provoke mutations when used as prefixes, e.g. mamm (mother), thus serving to distinguish the composite word.

B. Mutation by Strengthening: This takes place after a consonant.

1. After the final z of the second person plural of the singular possessive or its composed forms, e.g. daz + breur -- daz preur; ez + genou -- ez kenou.

2. After the possessive second person plural ho, formerly middle Breton hoz, e.g. ho + breah -- ho preah.

3. When the initial of certain words is preceded by h, z, d, b or g the two consonants strengthen, e.g. c'hweh + gwech -- c'hwec'h kwech; seiz + gwech -- seis kwech.

4. After certain words such as hent (road) b strengthens to p. e.g. hent + braz -- hent praz.

5. d becomes t after the verbal particles e, formerly ez, o, formerly oz, and the conjunction ma formerly ma + oz -- maz: e.g. emei o tond (she comes); ma teu (if he comes).

C. Mutation by Aspiration: Produced by consonants and consonant-vowels or liquids.

1. After the first person singular, ma, va, m, and its composites, e.g. ma + penn -- ma venn (my head); dam + ti -- dam zi (at my house).

2. Third person singular feminine he (English her), e.g. he + paotr -- he faotr (her boy); he + ki -- he hi (her dog).

3. Third person plural o, e.g. o + tad -- o zad (their dad); o + plac'h -- o vlah (their girl).

4. K by itself mutates by aspiration after the articles ar and eur and the first person plural of the possessive hon, heur, e.g. ar + karr -- ar hirri (carts).

D. Mixed Mutations: These are produced by the verbal particles already noted -- e, o and the conjunction ma. They weaken b, g, m to v, h, but strengthen d to t.

E. Mutations Due to Numbers:

1. The indefinite article eun, eur, al, provokes mutation by weakening and aspiration but the only one of interest here has been noted, i.e. aspiration of k. The other mutations will be noted in the grammatical section.

2. The numbers, 3, 4 and 9 in their masculine and feminine forms provoke mutations in different ways in different areas, either causing no mutation, sometimes aspiration or more generally, weakening.

e.g.	<u>Masculine form</u>	<u>Feminine form</u>
3	tri	
4	pevar	teir
9	nao	peder
		nao

F. Certain words in colloquial expression provoke a mutation of irregular form, e.g. avel + krenv -- avel grenv; c'hwez + mad -- c'hwez vad but c'hwez moged; milier + kerc'h -- milier gerh; leur + ti -- leur zi (but leur di in another meaning); c'hoari + kilhou -- c'hoari hilhou, etc.

Grammatical Reasons for Mutation.

A. Mutation by weakening can indicate in a noun its qualifying word and its complement.

1. The feminine singular

e.g. p -- pluenn (pen) eur bluenn zir; plural -- plu dir.
t -- taol (table) eun doul vraz; plural taoliou braz.
k -- kador (chair) eur gador goad; plural kadoriou koad.
b -- bag (boat) eur vag vihan; plural bagou bihan or bigi bihan.
d -- delhenn (leaf) eun delenn zu.
g -- geotenn (grass) eur heotenn verr, or eur geotenn verr, or eur yeotenn verr.
m -- micher (work) eur vicher denn; plural micheriou tenn.
s -- silienn (eel) eur zilienn veo; plural siliou beo.
ch -- chidouarn (cauldron) eur jidouard goz; plural chidouarnou koz.

This regularity of these mutations is impeded by certain phonetic factors. The article an, eun, before a vowel or dental stops the mutation of d to z; e.g. eun delhenn zu. Formerly the n of the article assimilated the d as in an douar which was an nouar. This remains in place names like Nervouet for An Dervouet and in the form an nor for dor (door).

B. When the word is terminated by a consonant which ordinarily provokes mutation by strengthening, this consonant opposes mutation by weakening of the following consonant, e.g. eur votez koad; eur vamm-gaer; droug kalon.

C. In the groups sp, st, sk the mutable consonant is protected from mutation by the unvoiced occlusive which follows it, e.g. eur stal vihan; eur spilhenn vleo.

D. Certain feminine words behave as masculine after the article. These are plac'h, greg, gar. Whilst two masculine words tra and mad and the masculine words commencing by s followed by a vowel undergo the mutation as if they are feminine: e.g. eun dra (tra); eur vad (mad); eur zoudard (soudard).

2. The masculine plural of names and places:

p -- paotred (boys) : ar baotred.
t -- toerien (roofers) : ar doerien.

- k -- kemenerien (tailors) : ar gemenerien.
b -- beleg (priest) : ar veleien.
d -- dialouled (adults) : an diaouled (protected by the n).
g -- gwazed (servants) : ar wazed.
s -- soudarded (soldiers) : ar zoudarded.
ch -- charetourien (carters) : ar charetourien (no mutation is made).
m -- martoloded (sailors) : ar vartoloded.

Again phonetic considerations alter some of the expected mutations in dealing with these words:

- (a) The qualifying word following these plurals is usually protected from mutation by the d of the ed of the plural of personal nouns.
- (b) When exceptionally these personal plurals have the impersonal -ou plural, they behave as impersonal pronouns and do not undergo mutation: e.g., ar meniou (the major); an tadou (the fathers).
- (c) On the other hand the plural of an impersonal noun undergoes mutation: e.g., ar mean (the stone); ar vein (the stones).

3. Some masculine singulars provoke mutation by weakening. These are masculine Christian names in compound words, e.g. Yann-Vari -- Jean Marie.

4. When numbers are used as prefixes, that is, apart from 1, 3, 4, 9 they weaken the consonant following, e.g., deg vraz -- deg + braz.

We have seen in general that weakening mutations are provoked by vowels and liquids, and strengthening mutations by the consonants. As the vowel is the mark of the feminine singular and of the masculine plural of personal nouns, the mutation by weakening has taken on a grammatical significance.

Two points remain to be made:

Firstly mutations may not take place in speech if the speaker is using a strong accentuation because of wishing to convey his meaning. This can be summarised as follows:

- (a) When the word which should be affected introduces a group of words forming a unity and is consequently strongly accented, there is no mutation, e.g. ar brasa maouez (the biggest women); or, if there are two qualifying adjectives, the first is not affected.
- (b) When to express a certain meaning the speaker stresses the word, e.g. eur mamm.

Secondly in ordinary speech the mutations of simple words are arrested at a certain stage so as not to make the words unrecognisable. It is the same in composed words which retain the meaning of their parts, e.g., pen-gwele (head of the bed)

where each part is clearly understood. This is not so however, in other composed words where the meaning of the parts is forgotten, as in pennwele, pennvele (pillow).

In place names no care is necessary in preserving the sense and it has usually been forgotten. Consequently, mutation has proceeded to such a degree that much careful study is needed to re-establish the root words which are completely unrecognisable.

We have not time to enter into their study here, but as a general principle the mutations are of the same order as those briefly covered in this paper.