Language Dynamics in the Early Modern Period

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Chapter 3

National Myths and Language Status in Early Modern Wales and Brittany

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3 National Myths and Language Status in Early Modern Wales and Brittany

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Introduction: conflict and contradiction in the use of historical narratives

The early modern period saw the expansion of powerful European kingdoms such as England and France first into neighbouring kingdoms and then beyond the shores of Europe through a process of global colonisation.[1] The hegemonic vernacular languages of these kingdoms, English and French, also expanded both functionally, taking over domains of use from Latin, and geographically, displacing the vernacular languages of the subjugated territories at least initially as the language of administration and to an extent as the language of the political and landowning elite, if not of the wider population.

This paper explores how the cultural interchange, language contact and linguistic conflict which arose as a result of the imperial expansion of the English and French kingdoms into neighbouring territories is reflected in contemporary ideologies of national origins, language antiquity and language status. I focus in particular on how the use of national myths or (pseudo-)historical narratives[2] in early modern Britain and France reveals *conflicts* and *contradictions* between the perspectives of the dominant nations, England and France, and those of two subordinate nations, Wales and Brittany, formally annexed by their larger neighbours in the 16th century, Wales by England and Brittany by France. I examine in turn how the use of the (pseudo-)historical narratives impinged on the status of Welsh and Breton, the indigenous vernacular languages of Wales and Brittany, respectively. In focusing on *conflicts* and *contradictions* in the use of national pseudo-historical narratives, I am referring to three phenomena:

a Conflicts and contradictions between versions of the same pseudo-historical narrative as used by different cultures which were in contact with each other, specifically between dominant and subordinate cultures. Different religious faiths (Catholic vs. Protestant) as well as cultures shared the same or similar national historical narratives;

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insofar as the different cultures were in conflict or in competition, such as English and Welsh on the one hand, and Breton and French, on the other, the way a national narrative was used by one culture could contradict or undermine the way it was used by another culture.

b Internal contradictions, tensions or inconsistencies within individual pseudo-historical narratives.

c Contradictions or mismatches between myth or ideology and reality, specifically between ideological perceptions of language status implicit in a pseudo-historical narrative and sociolinguistic reality.

Previous scholarship has tended to focus either on the religious dimension of conflicts in the use of historical narratives, such as how during the Reformation, Protestant and Catholic polemicists each sought to appropriate Church history to legitimise their own faith while undermining that of their religious opponents (Williams, 1967: 19–54; Heal, 2005; Kewes, 2006; Oates, 2012), or on the political/cultural dimension, such as the use of historical narratives in the development of national identity and nationalism (Bradshaw, 1996, 1998; Roberts, 1998; Nice, 2009). Here, I seek to focus on the linguistic dimension, on the one hand examining the role of national vernacular languages in national historical narratives themselves, in particular how the narratives reflect changes in the status of vernacular languages in the early modern period (e.g. the development and promotion of vernacular languages, the functional expansion of vernacular languages at the expense of Latin especially in religious worship, the association of vernacular languages with national identity at a time of increasing nationalism as well as changing ideas on language origins and antiquity), and on the other hand exploring the relationship between the ideological status of vernacular languages in national historical narratives and their actual political, cultural, sociolinguistic status. The English, Welsh, French and Breton national historical narratives all came to be revised in the 16th century, reflecting these wider contemporary political, religious and cultural changes. In the following section, I present a brief overview of the narratives and how they changed in the 16th century before discussing the points of conflict and contradiction in the use of the narratives and their implications for the status of the indigenous vernacular languages, first in Wales and then in Brittany.

Revision of national historical narratives in the 16th century

Until the 16th century, both Wales and Brittany had the same national origin story (the "medieval British national origin myth"), reflecting the actual shared history of the two nations, with the Bretons of Brittany

descended from Britons, also ancestors of the Welsh, who emigrated from the Isle of Britain to Brittany from the fourth to the sixth centuries (Guy, 2014). The Welsh and Breton languages are also closely related as Brythonic sister languages. According to the medieval British national origin myth, the Britons traced their origin to the Trojan military leader Brutus, great grandson of Aeneas, who settled the Island of Britain, then only inhabited by a few giants, with a community of Trojan exiles (Geoffrey of Monmouth, 2007: 20–29; Le Duc and Sterckx, 1972 [early 15th century]: 26–29). The Britons came to rule the whole Island of Britain and, in turn, settled Brittany. The Trojan origin of the British was calqued on the Roman national origin myth in Virgil's *Aeneid* and was also, significantly, shared by the medieval French national origin story, which in its earliest attested version traced the origin of the French to an eponymous mythical ancestor Francion, the son of Friga, brother of Aeneas, who fled Troy and eventually settled in what is now France (Beaune, 1985: 19–54; Rio, 2000: 27–32).

In the second half of the 16th century, the Welsh and Breton national historical narratives diverged and began to draw closer to those of their larger neighbours, the English and the French, respectively. The key factor underlying the revision of the English and Welsh national historical narratives was religious: the English Reformation. English Protestant apologists such as James Pilkington (1563/1842: 510–515), John Jewel (1567: 492), John Foxe (1563/2011: 32) and Matthew Parker (1568: ii–v) sought to legitimise the new protestant Church of England against accusations by Catholics that it was a new-fangled religion by arguing that it represented a return to the pure Christian faith of the Early Church, specifically the early British Church, while Roman Catholicism was a corruption (Heal, 2005; Oates, 2012; Williams, 1967). Here the conflict and contradiction in the use of national historical narratives centres on the appropriation of history. The English version of the narrative effectively appropriated Welsh history since the early British Church was the church of the ancestors of the Welsh, the ancient Britons, and predated the settlement of the English, who moreover were still pagan at the time of their conquest of the Island of Britain. Richard Davies, in turn, also recast the Welsh national historical narrative in Protestant terms in his preface to the 1567 Welsh translation of the New Testament (Davies, 1567/1967), acknowledging the spiritual leadership of the Church of England and the political supremacy of the English monarchy in Wales. However, at the same time, Davies re-appropriates the early British Church as a part of Welsh history and cultural heritage, and in so doing, at least implicitly subverts aspects of the English narrative. Language and specifically the status of the Welsh language is central to this story. Davies' narrative was a powerful apology for the Welsh language as the marker of Welsh identity and as the vehicle of the Christian worship in Wales, past, present and future, just as much as it was an apology for the

Protestant Church itself. Davies' narrative was influential in Wales and contributed to a cultural context, together with the Welsh Bible translation, in which the Welsh language could flourish despite the increasing dominance of English.

In the case of France and Brittany, it was the story of national origins itself that was revised. In the 16th century, French then Breton scholars began to trace their national origins to the ancient Gauls (or Celts) rather than to the Trojans. This shift in the quest for ancestry reflected two wider trends in contemporary European thought: the questioning of the Trojan tradition on the grounds that it was not attested in rediscovered classical sources (Beaune, 1985: 26–27) and the desire to trace national and linguistic origins ultimately to Biblical sources, specifically to the generations of Noah and the first emergence of differentiated languages following the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 10–11). The rediscovery of the ancient Gauls also enabled French scholars to develop a distinctively French national origin story and, therefore, one with more nationalistic potential since the previous Trojan-centred narrative was shared with other nations (the Germans and English as well as the Welsh and Bretons). The linguistic dimension of the Breton national historical narrative is particularly interesting as it is this which sets it apart from and at odds with the French national historical narrative. The Breton chronicler Bertrand d'Argentré (1582) and after him 17th and 18th century Breton grammarians and scholars (Maunoir, 1659; de Rostrenen, 1732, 1738; Le Pelletier, 1752; Pezron, 1703) claimed that Breton was the same language as the ancient Gaulish language, which in turn was believed to be one of the ancient, original languages of the generations of Noah – specifically the language of Gomer, the son of Japheth and grandson of Noah – which came into existence by Divine creation following the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel.[3] French, on the hand, was considered to be a more recent language, created by Man through the mixture of Latin, Germanic and Gaulish. Through their language, the Bretons thus had a stronger claim to Gaulish ancestry than the French, whose connection with the ancient Gauls was only historical and territorial. So, in the case of France and Brittany, the conflict and contradiction in the use of national historical narratives lie in the paradox of status: despite its prestigious historical pedigree (according to contemporary language ideology, antiquity was a supreme marker of prestige), Breton now had a low sociolinguistic status, subordinate to French. French was the official language of the French state, the regional administration of Brittany, as well as the predominant language of learning, letters and scholarship in the Breton speaking western half of Brittany. In section 4, I explore how this paradox is reflected in contemporary Breton sources and whether Breton's historical pedigree had an impact on its status as a living language.

National historical narratives and the status of the Welsh language

Historical context

At the time of the Act of Union of England and Wales in 1536, Wales was overall a strongly monolingual Welsh-speaking nation and remained largely so throughout the early modern period (Jenkins *et al.*, 1997). However, following the Union of England and Wales, there was a real possibility of the complete anglicisation of Wales. Since King Edward I of England's conquest of Wales in the 13th century, Wales had ceased to be independent and had been part of the crown dominion of England, without being fully integrated into the Kingdom of England. The Act of Union formally made Wales an integral part of the Kingdom of England, establishing legal and administrative uniformity throughout England and Wales. English law was established as the only applicable law throughout England and Wales and English became the official language of the law and administration. Welshmen were only able to hold public office in Wales if they spoke English and risked the forfeiture of their function for using Welsh (Roberts, 1989: 28). Although the use of English in the law and administration may not have immediately and directly affected the everyday life of most Welsh speakers, the adoption of English as an official language encouraged the anglicisation of the native Welsh upper classes. However, the effect of the 1549 Act of Uniformity, which adopted the English Book of Common Prayer as the sole legal form of worship, was potentially more wide-reaching, as it established English as the language of worship in the new Protestant Church of England (Roberts, 1989: 50).

Nevertheless, there was little opposition to the Union with England. In the words of Bradshaw (1996: 47), "the annexation of Wales 'as a very member and joint of the English realm' not only failed to elicit the slightest whimper of protest from the Welsh but [...] came to be eulogised by their literati as a benevolence". At the same time, Wales maintained a strong sense of national identity and indeed paradoxically, as Peter Roberts (1998: 8) remarked, "Wales and Welsh identity emerged from the imperial programme of the Tudors strengthened rather than undermined". Various factors seem to have contributed to the acceptance by the Welsh of the Union with England, on the one hand, and the maintenance of a distinctive Welsh national identity, on the other. First, under the Act of Union, the Welsh became equal citizens of the Kingdom of England with the English; previously, in parts of Wales (the so-called Englishries, areas settled by English and Anglo-Norman immigrants), the Welsh had been treated as foreigners in their own country. Second, the English royal house of Tudor (comprising five monarchs, Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth I spanning the period from

1485 to 1603) had Welsh origins. The Tudor union of England and Wales could therefore be interpreted in terms of the Welsh national historical narrative as a rebirth of the old (and glorious) kingdom of Britain when the British, the ancestors of the Welsh, had possession of (the whole) of the Island of Britain. Third, a renewed Welsh national identity developed following the Union with England, based on the Protestant faith and the Welsh language and enabled crucially by the translation of the Bible and liturgy into Welsh: the Book of Common Prayer, Psalms and New Testament in 1567 followed by the whole Bible in 1588.

The tension between the acceptance of the union with England and the re-assertion of a distinctive Welsh identity in opposition to England is apparent in Richard Davies' use and adaptation of the Welsh national historical narrative in his preface to the 1567 Welsh translation of the New Testament, known as the *Epistol at y Cembru* ("Address to the Welsh Nation"). First, I outline the medieval Welsh national historical narrative as it existed prior to Davies' *Address to the Welsh Nation* per Geoffrey of Monmouth, then how British history was used by English protestant apologists and finally how Richard Davies in turn revised the Welsh narrative.

Who are the inheritors of the glorious British past? Ambiguity in the medieval British national historical narrative

The traditional Welsh national historical narrative was based on Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* ("History of the Kings of Britain"), dated to the first half of the 12th century (Geoffrey of Monmouth, 2007). This work was translated into Welsh (commonly known as *Brut y Brenhinedd*) and the Welsh translation is attested in numerous manuscripts (approximately 60), the earliest dating from the 13th century (Roberts, 1984: xxiv). The key elements of this narrative pertinent to our discussion here are:

- Britain was converted to Christianity during the reign of Lucius son of Coillus (*Lles fab Coel* in Welsh), who wrote to Pope Eleutherius requesting instruction in the Christian religion. The Pope sent Fagan and Duvian to instruct him and Lucius was converted, with the people of the Island of Britain following suit. In their wars with the English, the Welsh are portrayed as Christians fighting against the pagan English, who were only converted much later to Christianity in the time of Pope Gregory.
- The Britons experienced an era of glory under King Arthur, who not only won many victories in the wars with the English but also conquered Gaul.
- Brittany (Armorica) was settled by Britons from the Island of Britain, led by Maximianus and Conan Meriadoc, turning Armorica into a

"second Britain"; Britons replaced the indigenous population and the British language came to prevail there.

- The Britons used to have possession of the whole of the Island of Britain, but the English settled there and obtained through conquest from the Britons most of the Island of Britain, the part that came to be known as England ("Loegria"). The Britons were ultimately forced to retreat to Wales and Cornwall.
- Geoffrey of Monmouth's narrative concludes (2007: 280–281) with a contrast between the past glory of the Britons and the present state of decline of their descendants, the Welsh. He notes that "as their culture ebbed, they were no longer called Britons, but Welsh" ("Barbarie etiam irrepente, iam non vocabantur Britones sed Gualenses"), while in contrast, the English acted more wisely and thus came to rule most of the Island of Britain. Moreover, the Welsh are described as "unworthy successors of the noble Britons" who "never again recovered mastery of the whole island" ("Degenerati autem a Britannica nobilitate Gualenses numquam postea monarchiam insulae recuperaverunt").

The concept of "Britain", as is apparent even in Geoffrey of Monmouth's narrative, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, "Britain" could be seen from a linguistic and cultural perspective as the expression of a distinctly Welsh identity, since the Welsh were the descendants of the Britons and spoke the same language; from this perspective, the Welsh were the inheritors of the history of Britain. On the other hand, Britain could be seen as reflecting the political and territorial reality, where the English occupied the majority of the island and controlled also those parts, Wales and Cornwall, still occupied by the Britons. From this second perspective, the English could appropriate British history as their own, as though by virtue of becoming political masters of the territory of the island of Britain, they had inherited the whole history of Britain, even that which predated their presence on the island (Currie, 2016: 154–155).

16th century Protestant adaptation of the British national historical narrative

The story of the early conversion of the British to Christianity was useful to English Protestant apologists in the 16th century who sought to defend the new Protestant Church of England from accusations by Catholic apologists that it was a newly invented religion without authority or historical legitimacy. Two arguments were critical for the Protestant apologists: first, that the British had been converted early to Christianity, so had the pure faith of the Early Church before it became corrupted by the addition of extraneous practices characteristic of the

Catholic Church (e.g. celibacy of priests, cult of the Virgin Mary), and second, that the British acquired Christianity directly from an apostle of Christ, Joseph of Arimathea,[4] rather than from Papist Rome. The English protestant apologists drew on various sources, typically Classical historians and Church fathers – Geoffrey of Monmouth was not as central for them as he was in Wales and Brittany. One consequence of emphasising the roots of the Church of England in the early British Church was the undermining of the role played by St Augustine of Canterbury, traditionally credited with converting the English to Christianity from the end of the sixth century (Williams, 1967: 215). Augustine, once the saviour of the English, is now attacked for bringing heretical practices to Britain as well as for being complicit in the massacre of thousands of Christians (in particular British monks at Bangor on Dee) as, for example, by Jewel in his *Defence of the Apologie of the Churche of Englande* (Jewel, 1567: 492). It is important to stress that the way the history of the British Church is used by English apologists is not uniform – there are differences in detail and emphasis – but generally, they do not acknowledge potential contradictions in their narrative, in particular the fact that English were first pagan when the British were already Christian and the fact that the Welsh may have a competing claim on the history of the British Church which could undermine the English one. Foxe is an exception in stating "the Saxones being then infidels, with Hengistus their kinge, subdued the Britans by fraudulent murder, & inuaded their land" (Foxe, 1563/2011: 32).

Richard Davies's *Address to the Welsh nation* gives the historical narrative a particularly Welsh dimension, with the Welsh language playing a central role. First, Davies emphasises that the British, ancestors of the Welsh, had been converted to Christianity at the time of the Early Church directly by a disciple of Christ, Joseph of Arimathea, before the Roman Church had become corrupted. Centuries later, the Welsh had the corrupt Roman Catholic faith imposed upon them by force by the English (Anglo-Saxons), after being conquered by the English. Davies argued that the Christian faith which Saint Augustine of Canterbury brought to England at the end of the sixth century was already corrupt, meaning that the English (who were converted to Christianity later than the Welsh) acquired from the beginning a corrupt form of Christianity. Davies further emphasised how ingrained Christianity had become in Welsh culture, citing current Welsh proverbs (e.g. *A Duw a digon: heb Dduw heb ddim* "God is plenty: without God there is nothing", Davies 1967: 31-33) and giving several quotations from earlier Welsh poetry, which, he argued, encapsulated the Christian message. Davies further asserted that the Welsh had also had the Bible in their own language (he refers to a Welsh version of the five Books of Moses he remembered seeing as a boy), but that the manuscripts which contained the Welsh Bible along with many other precious manuscripts had been destroyed

in the wars with the English. So, Davies concluded, the Welsh had been privileged by God in comparison with other nations in being converted so early to Christianity, then suffered a dramatic fall from grace in losing their pure faith, but now had been presented with a unique chance of redemption with the printed translation of the New Testament in their own language and the pure Protestant faith of the Church of England. At the same time, Davies acknowledges the spiritual hegemony of the Church of England and expresses gratitude to the Queen of England and the Bishops of the Church of England for granting the Welsh the opportunity to have the Bible again in their own language. Davies's message is overtly a justification of the new Protestant faith of the Church of England for a Welsh audience with the aim of winning over priests and laity attached to the traditional Roman Catholic faith. However, at the same time, Davies' specifically Welsh narrative at least implicitly subverts the English historical justification of the Church of England.

It would be misleading and over simplistic, however, to seek to present a black and white picture of English cultural appropriation and oppression, on the one hand, and Welsh resistance, on the other. While Davies appears to subvert the English narrative with his Welsh one, he and his fellow (and principal) translator of the 1567 New Testament, William Salesbury, were also an important source of antiquarian information on the British Church for the English Protestant apologists and corresponded with Archbishop Matthew Parker (Roberts, 1998: 28–29; Williams, 1953). Further, the translation of the Bible into Welsh was enabled by a 1563 Act of the English parliament, which was passed both as a result of lobbying on the Welsh side and support from key English figures such as William Cecil, Lord Burghley, chief advisor to Queen Elizabeth I (Roberts, 1996: 130).

Significance for the status of the Welsh language

The development of national historical narratives in 16th century England and Wales provides an additional insight into the cultural interchange and tensions between the two nations at a time of major political and religious change. It is also pertinent to consider whether the use of the English and Welsh national historical narratives and the apparent conflicts and contradictions between them may have had a wider significance or impact the beyond learned circles where they were expounded and debated. I would argue that the Davies' historical narrative did have a wider impact beyond learned circles: it came to be particularly influential in Wales, contributing to the positive reception of the translation of the Bible into Welsh as well as to a renewed national identity based upon the Protestant faith and the Welsh language (Price, 2019: 190–191). The 1567 Welsh New Testament (Salesbury, 1567), in which Davies' *Address to the Welsh nation* appeared, was superseded by another (complete)

Bible translation only 21 years later. However, Davies' narrative lived on, became the received version of Welsh church history and continued to be influential in Wales for at least the next two to three centuries. Aspects of Davies' narrative and the underlying British national historical narrative based on Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* were reproduced or retold in historical and religious treatises – such as Charles Edwards' *Y Ffydd Ddi-ffvant* (Edwards, 1677) and Theophilus Evans' *Drych y Prif Oesoedd* (Evans, 1716/1961), both of which had a wide circulation – as well as in popular drama such as 18th century interludes (Owen, 1734/5; Parry, 1737).

The translation of the Bible into Welsh was also a pivotal moment for the development of the Welsh language. It is widely recognised that, had the Bible not been translated into Welsh, the survival of Welsh as a literary and indeed community language could have been threatened. The 16th century translation of the Bible into Welsh, made possible by a 1563 Act of the English parliament, also appeared to go against the grain of contemporary political developments. The 1536 and 1543 Acts of Union as well as the 1549 Act of Uniformity suggested a trend of political and cultural assimilation of Wales into England, while the translation of the Bible into Welsh, on the other hand, was a major step in maintaining Welsh cultural distinctiveness. The translation of the Bible into Welsh further encouraged the development of a new, abundant (predominantly) religious literature in Welsh, both original and translated, in particular popular works of practical religious instruction as well as more learned treatises and polemical works. The availability of popular printed works, including a portable version of the Bible from 1630, as well as regular religious worship in Welsh both in church and at home, also encouraged wider literacy despite the lack of formal education in Welsh (Ó Ciosáin, 2013: 15).

National historical narratives and status of the Breton language in Brittany

Historical context

The linguistic situation in 16th century Brittany was significantly different from that of Wales. Whereas 16th century Wales was a largely monolingual Welsh-speaking nation, Brittany was only partially Breton-speaking. Even before the union with France (formal legal union took place in 1532, though effective union had occurred in 1491 with the marriage of Anne, duchess of Brittany, to king Charles VIII of France), French had become the official language of Brittany, reflecting a wider pattern of the expansion of standard or the "King's" French throughout the regions of France (Lodge, 1993: 119–133). Since the early Middle Ages, when Breton retreated from most of Eastern Brittany, Brittany had

been divided into two distinct cultural halves: a Breton-speaking West (Lower Brittany) and a Romance-speaking[5] East (Upper Brittany). The ducal capitals of Brittany, Rennes and Nantes, were both in the East. While Lower Brittany remained until well into the second half of the 19th century a very largely monolingual Breton-speaking nation (Broudig, 1995: 55), the consequences of this early retreat of Breton were profound. In a trilingual society, Breton was at the bottom of the linguistic hierarchy, below both Latin and French; Breton remained predominantly a language of oral communication and the proportion of written material from Brittany up to the 18th century in Breton was minuscule compared to that in Latin and French (Guyonvarc'h, 1997) and Breton literature, in general, came to be a peripheral literature dependent to varying degrees on the French cultural sphere (Blanchard and Thomas, 2014: 14–21). The chronicles where the Breton national historical narrative is presented are also written in French (Le Baud, 1638; Argentré, 1582; Bouchart, 1514/1986) or Latin (Le Duc and Sterckx, early 15th century/1972), with none in Breton. However, it is significant that even for French-speaking chroniclers from Upper Brittany (such as Argentré and Le Baud), who represented the majority of Breton historiographers (Kerhervé, 1997: 247), the Breton language was regarded as central to Breton identity and as a key factor which differentiated Brittany from France (Rio, 2000: 142).

The medieval British national origin myth connected Brittany historically, culturally and linguistically to Britain and emphasised its distinctness from France – while it was still an independent duchy – both ethnically, as its population was believed to be descended from Britons as opposed to Gauls or Franks, and crucially, linguistically, as the Bretons spoke a different language from the French. The *Chronicon Briocense*, for example, states that the Bretons preserved the language of the ancient Trojans, while the French, who also had ultimate Trojan origins, became mixed with the Gauls and adopted the language of the Franks (Le Duc and Sterckx, early 15th century/1972: 74). Following the revision of both the Breton and French national origin myths in the 16th century, the Breton origin myth became aligned with the French one at least in terms of ethnic origins, as the ancient Gauls were recognised as the ancestors of both nations; Brittany's historical ties with Britain – now the Kingdom of England and a major rival to France – and equally the grounds for a potential English claim to Brittany were thus weakened. The crucial role of language in keeping Brittany distinct from France was, however, maintained in the revised Breton national origin myth.

Reinvention of the Breton and French origin legends

The first Breton scholar to revise the Breton national historical narrative was Bertrand d'Argentré in his 1582 *Histoire de Bretaigne* (Argentré, 1582; Rio, 2000: 184–214). Argentré attacks Geoffrey of Monmouth's

Brutus/Trojan origin story as well as the notion that Brittany was settled by Britons from the Isle of Britain and instead argues that the Bretons are descended from the ancient Gauls, who then settled in Britain and brought their language to the island. Argentré further argues that the Bretons alone in Gaul/France have maintained the language of the ancient Gauls, as Brittany was the part of Gaul least overrun by foreign invaders, whether Romans or Franks, whereas elsewhere in Gaul, the language of the Romans prevailed, which ultimately developed into Romance ("romande") under the influence of the Francs. Interestingly, Argentré notes the exception of the Romance-speaking eastern part of Brittany "neighbouring France which through the effect of trade and proximity changed language some centuries ago, though originally the language was one and the same [i.e. Breton]" (my translation of Argentré, 1582: 38). Argentré also notes that the Welsh are the survivors of the Gauls in the Isle of Britain, that they still speak the British language ("langage breton") and that the Welsh and Bretons can still understand one an other.

The Gaulish origin myth was already well established in France prior to the publication of the first edition of Argentré's history of Brittany in 1582, with writers such as Jean Lemaire de Belges (1882 [1512]), Guillaume Postel (1552), Guillaume du Bellay (1556), Jean Picard (1556), Robert Céneau (1557) and François Hotman (1574), amongst others, tracing the origins of the French nation back to the Ancient Gauls. The key elements of the French Gaulish origin myth involved demonstrating the antiquity of the Gauls, rehabilitating their reputation as a glorious but forgotten civilisation older than ancient Rome and establishing the French as their descendants and inheritors of their glorious past. According to Dubois' detailed study of the development of the "Gaulish/Celtic" origin myth in 16th century France (Dubois, 1972), the revision of national origin myths reflected a broader nationalist trend: a shift from an essentially common origin legend centred on Rome (and Troy) to particular national origin legends for individual nations to set themselves apart from and raise themselves above their neighbours and rivals. In the French case, as Dubois has argued, identifying with the ancient Gauls served both as a form of cultural decolonisation vis-à-vis Greece and Rome and, at a time of French imperial expansionism, of justifying France's current greatness by projecting it into the past: "la celtomanie de cette époque, au temps des entreprises impérialistes de François Ier et de Henri II, fait chercher dans le passé un fondement à la grandeur présente" (Dubois, 1972: 28).

The French national myth, in general, seems to have emphasised historical and territorial rather than linguistic continuity with the ancient Gauls; language does not on the whole have a prominent role in the French sources (Postel, 1552; Picard, 1556; Du Bellay, 1556). Fauchet, for example, who does mention the Gaulish language in his treatise on

the origin of the French language and poetry, states that Gaulish became extinct and that French, or more accurately "Romance" ("Romand"), derives primarily from Latin (Fauchet, 1581: 12–13). Hotman (1574: 21) and Taillepied (1585: 84b) even suggest that Breton-speaking Bretons ("Bretons bretonnants") are the linguistic descendants of the ancient Gauls, having alone retained their language.

Significance for the status of the Breton language

The identification of the Breton language with Gaulish presented a curious paradox: according to the Breton national myth, Breton was considered to be a particularly ancient language and thus had a historical pedigree superior even to that of French, despite being a low-status language with no official recognition or support. I sought to investigate two questions: is this paradox reflected in early modern works dealing with the Breton language and did the ideological prestige conferred upon Breton have any impact on its actual status and development?

While the first Breton source of the revised national myth was a historical work – Bertrand d'Argentré's (1582) chronicle – later sources, all in French,[6] are works specifically devoted to the Breton language: Julien Maunoir's *Sacré Collège de Jesus* including a Breton grammar, dictionary and catechism (1659), Grégoire de Rostrenen's Breton dictionary (1732) and grammar (1738), Abbé Pezron's treatise on the antiquity of the Breton or Celtic language (1703) and Dom Louis Le Pelletier's Breton etymological dictionary (1716/1975, 1752). An antiquarian interest in Breton may have encouraged the codification of the language and emergence of a Breton grammatical and lexicographical tradition in the 17th and 18th centuries (Hincks, 1995) since, in the prefaces, the authors justify the fact they are publishing works on Breton in part because of its historical and etymological interest. However, the main motivation for Maunoir and Grégoire's grammars and dictionaries seems to have been religious: to facilitate Catholic missionary work in Breton-speaking Brittany by providing grammars and dictionaries to help priests to learn Breton and preach and catechise in the language. This religious motivation is stated explicitly in the prefaces to Maunoir's grammar and Rostrenen's dictionary and grammar, and is reflected in the long title of Grégoire's dictionary. Both Maunoir and Grégoire were in fact themselves priests, Maunoir a Jesuit, Grégoire a Capucin. Maunoir's historical justification of the Breton language is indeed at one with his religious justification. He argues that Breton is the same language as the ancient Gaulish language and that Gaulish was, in turn, one of the original languages of the generations of Noah which came into existence following the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel (Maunoir, 1659: 10–16; Pezron, 1703: 183–184; Rostrenen, 1732: i–ii). Breton was thus a more ancient language than French and had a superior divine pedigree since it was one

of the original languages created by God, whereas French was a derived language created by Man – a mixture of corrupt Latin, Germanic and Gaulish (Maunoir, 1659: 13).

The tension between Breton's antiquarian pedigree and its contemporary sociolinguistic status is not reflected explicitly in Maunoir's preface but is in the later works by Grégoire and Le Pelletier. Grégoire uses the antiquity of Breton to justify publishing his grammar against the potential objection that it is too late to codify a "*dying* language" (Rostrenen 1738: vi), and argues that it is worthwhile, indeed necessary, to conserve a language which survives in only two small corners of France and England, since it provides etymologies for countless words as well as personal and place names in languages across Europe (1738: ix). Grégoire further counters the objection to conserving and cultivating Breton on the grounds that linguistic uniformity would be desirable for France (and beyond) by arguing that if the Romans with all their power and cultural predominance could not achieve linguistic uniformity, no monarch can, so each nation should speak and preserve its mother tongue, both to maintain community cohesion and to fulfil divine will (1738: x). Grégoire's arguments were, in fact, lifted from Davies's defence of the Welsh language in the preface to his Welsh grammar (Davies, 1621/1968), which Grégoire used as a model, so do not provide unambiguous direct testimony of Breton's sociolinguistic status, though Grégoire seems to have found them relevant and to have adapted them to the French and Breton context.

The starkest expression of the tension between Breton's historical pedigree and its sociolinguistic status is found in the preface to Le Pelletier's (manuscript) Breton etymological dictionary, which, unlike Maunoir and Grégoire's works, focuses on the antiquarian interest of the language – in particular for French scholars – rather than on its practical codification or use. Le Pelletier extols the glorious past of Breton, but contrasts this with its current lowly, indeed threatened status as a living language, denigrating its speakers in the process and implying that a language without the trappings of official status (like French) is not a fully developed language:

> Je l'ai trouvée si respectable pour son antiquité, si belle pour sa simplicité, si douce à l'oreille, et si sonnante par l'accent et la délicatesse de la prononciation, et surtout si noble par son origine et ses alliances, que j'ai continué mon travail avec plaisir, autant pour assurer à notre France une langue mère si ancienne et étendue, que pour répondre aux vœux des savants [...] que deviendra une pauvre Langue abandonnée au caprice et à la rusticité d'une populace ignorante et grossière; sans prince qui l'honnore, sans Academie qui la deffende de la corruption, sans inscriptions, sans actes publics, sans Auteurs ni livres anciens. [...] une langue ainsi dépourvüe de tout

> ce qui peut la faire passer à la posterité, ne peut manquer de périr pour toujours, si on vient à cesser de la parler. Et cela ne peut beaucoup tarder, Le François étant déjà la langue vulgaire non seulement dans les villes, mais aussi dans les bourgs, bourgades, passages et auberges [...].
>
> (Le Pelletier, 1716/1975: Preface 2–3)

> I found it [Breton] so honourable on account its antiquity, so elegant in its simplicity, so pleasant to the ear as well so melodious in its accent and subtleness of pronunciation and above all so noble in its origin and lineage that I continued my labours with pleasure, both to reveal this ancient and once widely-spoken ancestral language to our French nation and to respond to scholars' requests. [...] what is to become, though, of a language abandoned to the whim and coarseness of an ignorant and uncultivated folk, without a prince to honour it, without an Academy to defend it from corruption, without inscriptions, without public acts, without writers or ancient books. [...] a language thus bereft of all that is needed to ensure it is passed on to posterity cannot but be condemned to oblivion if it ceases to be spoken. Such a fate cannot indeed be far off: French is already the vernacular language not only of the towns, but also of the townships, villages, alleyways and inns [...] (My translation)

The promotion of French as the sole official language of the French nation at the expense of regional languages intensified during the early modern period, especially from the 17th century as the French kingdom further expanded and annexed non-French speaking areas on its borders such as Alsace, Béarn and Roussillon (Van Goethem, 1989). Notwithstanding its lack of official status, however, Breton continued to thrive throughout the early modern period both as the spoken vernacular of Lower Brittany and as a language of religious worship. Indeed, despite the fact that Breton was not the official language of religious worship (in contrast to Protestant Wales) and that there was not a complete Breton Bible translation until the 19th century (again in contrast to Wales), there was an active printing industry for practical religious works such as catechisms, hymns, carols, saints' lives and religious instruction manuals as well as a flourishing (predominantly religious) popular theatre (Roudaut, 1997). The Breton Saints' Lives (*Buhez an Sent*) was particularly popular and widely distributed, and its importance in Breton-speaking Brittany has been compared to that of the Welsh Bible in Wales (Le Menn, 1990: 508–510). The apparent widespread use of Breton practical religious works, as indicated in a study by Le Menn (1990: 508) of an 18th century printer's records, which revealed a large inventory of Breton language religious books and relatively high annual sales volumes, in turn suggests a potentially higher literacy in Breton

amongst the ordinary population than might have been expected given the lack of formal education in the language.

Breton's perceived superior historical pedigree compared to French did not alter its subordinate sociolinguistic status to French as a living language. The reappropriation of Breton history by Breton scholars to reclaim the antiquity language's antiquity did, nevertheless, seem to reflect a reaffirmation of and pride in the continued existence of the Breton language; for the strongest advocates of Breton amongst them, priests such as Maunoir and Grégoire, who sought to codify the language and actively promoted its use in worship, its value was more than simply symbolic and antiquarian.

Conclusion

The linguistic dimension of early modern national historical narratives is significant not just because the revision of the narratives coincided with rising nationalism and the promotion and expansion of national vernacular languages, but also because language was becoming an increasingly important badge of national identity and instrument of nationalism itself, in particular with the increasing identification of the nation state with a single national vernacular language. A key rationale for the revision of national historical narratives in the 16th century, as Dubois (1972: 28) has argued, was individual nations' quest for unique historical origins, in the place of a previously common origin story centred on ancient Rome and Latin culture, in order to reaffirm a distinct cultural identity and historical pedigree, as a well as potentially to justify their current political greatness or imperial ambitions. However, because early modern European nation-states like the kingdoms of England and France were, in fact, multinational and multilingual, we find similar, revised early modern national historical narratives also shared by different nations but within the same state.

In the case of England, a Protestant national historical narrative was shared by the English and Welsh, with both claiming religious continuity with the early British Church; in the case of France, both the French and the Bretons traced their origins to the ancient Gauls. The sharing of similar national historical narratives necessarily entailed conflicts and contradictions between the perspectives of the dominant nations England and France, on the one hand, and those of the subordinate nations, Wales and Brittany, on the other. The English Protestants claimed to have inherited the true and pure faith of the early British Church, but from the Welsh perspective, the early British Church was the church only of the ancestors of the Welsh, who identified themselves as the real descendants of the ancient Britons as they spoke the same language as them. The French claimed the ancient Gauls as their ancestors, but the Bretons had, in their version of the narrative, a stronger claim to continuity with the

ancient Gauls, as they, unlike the French, had preserved their language. So while the subordinate nations of Wales and Brittany enjoyed pre-eminence in their perceived antiquity, demonstrated by means of language, the English and French enjoyed political predominance, which enabled them to lay claim to and effectively appropriate the history of the territory which they controlled. Welsh and Breton writers, in turn, channelled the historical pedigree of their cultures and languages to promote the active use of their vernacular languages – in particular for religious worship – at a time of increasing dominance of the national official languages, English and French. The tension between the dominant and subordinate nations' appropriation and reappropriation of history in national historical narratives thus had a significance beyond that of antiquarian debate and impinged on the actual status of the vernaculars in competition.

Notes

1. I acknowledge the financial support of the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P6-0265).
2. I use the term "*pseudo*-historical" as opposed to simply "historical" narratives here to indicate that the narratives typically combine both history and myth. While there was a keen debate in the 16th and 17th centuries over the historicity of national origin stories (Williams, 1967; Kewes, 2006; Oates, 2012; Heal, 2005), my focus here is on how these narratives were used, not on their veracity.
3. Welsh scholars, notably John Davies in the preface to his 1621 grammar of the Welsh language (Davies, 1621/1968), also adopted the Gomer/Japheth myth. This chapter focuses on the use of church history, specifically the antiquity and authenticity of the British Church in the Welsh (and English) national historical narratives rather than on the antiquity of the Welsh language. See Davies (2000) for a discussion of the development of language antiquity myths in early modern Wales.
4. The conversion of the Britons by Joseph of Arimathea, earlier than the one by King Lucius in Geoffrey of Monmouth, is a later addition to the narrative (Heal, 2005: 605; Oates, 2012: 141; Davies, 1567/1967: 18).
5. I am using the term "Romance-speaking" to include both French and Gallo, the langue d'oïl variety traditionally spoken in Upper Brittany.
6. Maunoir (1659) includes a catechism in Breton, but the preface with his apology of the Breton language is in French, as is his Breton grammar.

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