

IN MEMORIAM: †JEAN LE DÛ (1938-2020)

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In his article ‘*Dans le silence de l’histoire*’,¹ Jean Le Dû quotes the French author, Michel Robida, whom he describes as a ‘*un bourgeois parisien*’. The latter wrote about a vacation he had spent in Plougrescant, an isolated fishing community on the Tregor coast of north-western Brittany where Jean’s parents and family originated. Robida offers the following account: ‘To pass the time we were taken to the farms where the use of the fork was still unknown. The farmworkers would dip their hands directly into the cabbage, lard, potatoes and curdled milk that constituted their everyday meal and which was placed before them in cavities that had been hollowed out directly into the wood of the table.’ The Parisian author adds that the roads were so rough that it took over an hour to travel to the closest town, Tréguier,² a mere 10 km away. This was the world into which Jean Le Dû was born in 1938 and which he knew intimately. Thoroughly Breton-speaking, only a few educated people in the parish spoke French, namely, the schoolmaster, the mayor, the priest and a few shop owners. All those from outside the parish boundaries, whether Breton or French-speaking, were viewed with suspicion and as outsiders.

After the war, Jean’s family moved to Dieppe, in Normandy, where a large Breton-speaking community manned the fishing and merchant marine fleets. Jean’s father earned his living on a fishing trawler. In a revealing passage from his article ‘Can a language be saved, the case of Breton’,³ he recounts a childhood experience which marked his realization that language is simply an extension of self.

I vividly remember my first day in the École Michelet, the local school in Dieppe, around Easter 1948, when the children came dancing around me shouting “Un Breton!” as if I had landed from another planet ... Children do not like to be different, so I quickly picked up their local brand of French, sprinkled with traces of Norman patois. That is probably the reason why I have ever since been interested in the way people vary in habits and languages. Up to that period, I took someone’s manner of speaking as a component of his personality, on a par with his gait, his size or the colour of his hair.

1. Cf. Le Dû, J. & Y. Le Berre, 2019, *Métamorphoses, 30 ans de sociolinguistique à Brest : 1984–2014*, Brest: CRBC, 267–73. For a synthesis of their book and their work more generally, cf. German, G., *fc.*, ‘Elements of a Sociolinguistic Theory: the Case of Breton’, *Dialectologia et Geolinguistica*.

2. The birthplace of Ernest Renan.

3. In Kallasmaa, M. & V. Oja, eds., 2009, *Ko-dukeela ja keele kodu. Home language and the home of a language*, Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 77–89.

As an adolescent growing up in Dieppe, Jean Le Dù remained attached to his Tregor dialect of Breton and made a point of speaking only Breton to his parents. At 18, after being admitted to the University of Rennes II, he majored in English and Breton language and literature. It bears mentioning that Jean and his grandmother served as Kenneth Jackson's informants for the Plougrescant area while he was preparing his monumental *Historical Phonology of Breton* (1967).⁴ After earning his licence (BA), Jean was accepted as a *lecteur* to the University of Galway (1960–62) where he mastered the Connemara variety of Irish that was still in general use as a community language. During his stay in Galway he became a lifelong friend of his roommate, Pádraig 'Paddy' MacKernan, who was later to become Secretary General of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs as well as ambassador to France and the United States. He was also a good friend of Professor Proinsias Mac Cana.

Jean's love for Ireland and the Irish language never diminished and, in 2010, he published his French translation of Micil Chonraí's autobiography (*Une vie irlandaise du Connemara à Ráth Chairn, histoire de la vie de Micil Chonraí*, Terre de brume-PUR, 2010) even before it was translated from Irish into English. His special affinity for the people of rural Ireland stemmed in large part from the close parallels he saw between his native Tregor and the poor Irish-speaking communities he encountered in the *Gaeltacht*.⁵ Given Jean's personal background, it is logical that his perception of language, whether Breton, Irish, English or French, should be from the perspective of vernacular speakers who, in general, have tended to be on the bottom rung of the social ladder. This social view fundamentally determined the orientation of his future research leading him to fiercely oppose the prescriptive policies advocated by certain Breton-language colleagues and activists at the University of Rennes II.

Upon his return from Ireland in 1962, Jean was nominated as an *assistant de phonétique* at the University of Rennes II and, despite two years of obligatory military service (1964–1965), he successfully completed a PhD (*Doctorat de 3ème Cycle*) in English phonology at the University of Rennes II in 1968. During this same year he was appointed as a *Maître-Assistant de Celtique* at the newly founded University of Western Brittany, Brest, where he spent the rest of his career. It was here that he applied to do a habilitation (*Thèse d'état*), devoted to the study of his native variety of Plougrescant Breton (Tregor dialect), under the supervision of Professor François Falc'hun. It was the latter's work in geolinguistics and Breton phonology that inspired Jean to focus his life's work on these topics.

In 1978, at the age of 40, he successfully defended his habilitation and, in 1980,

4. Jackson, K., 1967, *Historical Phonology of Breton*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

5. Cf. Le Dù, J., 2013, 'Revivalists and native speakers in Brittany and in Ireland: a paradoxical misunderstanding' in: C. Hambro, L. I. Widerøe, Lochlann: festschrift til Jan Erik Rekdal, Oslo: Hermes, 331–343.

was promoted to full professor, replacing Professor Falc'hun who had retired two years previously.

Shortly after his nomination, he embarked upon his *Nouvel Atlas Linguistique de la Basse-Bretagne*, an immense endeavour which will certainly be considered to be his greatest legacy. Published in 2001, it is a two-volume work comprising 600 maps each of which is composed of 187 geographical points of enquiry, nearly three times as many as Professor Le Roux's *Atlas Linguistique de la Basse-Bretagne* (1927–1977). Few languages of the world, whether endangered or not, can boast of two high-quality linguistic atlases documenting the state of vernacular Breton throughout the 20th century. Taken together, the two atlases represent a treasure trove of information for both variationists and diachronic linguists.

During the early 1980s, Jean Le Dû and his colleague, Yves Le Berre (who shared a similar social and linguistic background), decided to coordinate their work on the Breton language in an attempt to construct a coherent theoretical sociolinguistic framework in which to analyse language. In order to provide a forum in which scholars specializing in Breton and other languages could test and share their ideas, they founded the GRELB (*Groupe de recherche sur l'économie linguistique de la Bretagne*) in 1984. After ten years of fruitful seminars, Le Dû and Le Berre organized a seminal three-day international colloquium held in Brest entitled *Badume/Standard/Norme* (in 1994).⁶ In this colloquium, they presented many of the core theoretical concepts that are expressed in their *Metamorphoses* (cf. footnote 1).

One of their later research projects led them to contemplate the possibility of a common Gaulish substratum in both French and Breton. This was a hypothesis that had first been proposed by Professor Falc'hun during the 1950s and that had been received with considerable scepticism and was even openly mocked by leading Celtic-language specialists. Nevertheless, the view has recently gained wider acceptance, particularly among French toponymists who have found undeniable (and often late) Gaulish evidence in their micro-toponymic studies of France. Together with Yves Le Berre and Guylaine Brun-Trigaud, Jean Le Dû co-authored a thought-provoking book on this topic entitled *Lectures de l'Atlas Linguistique de la France de Gillieron et Edmont. Du temps dans l'espace*, CTHS, 2005, showing the shared linguistic heritage of French and Breton and long-standing Celtic (i.e. Gaulish) and Latin elements in both languages. His article in this volume was inspired from this research. It appears here for the first time in English for the benefit of an international audience. We are honoured to publish what was sadly destined to be Jean's last article.

6. *Badume* (unwritten, highly variable, 'paritary' basilects of Breton spoken by the mass of the Breton-speaking population); *Standard* (the ecclesiastical model proposed by the Catholic clergy for the celebration of mass, sermons, hymns and religious rites); *Norme* (the highly formal/disparitary form of French which is the official language of the French Republic).

I cannot do justice to his many accomplishments and contributions in such a short text and I can only mention a few of these. From 1984 until his retirement in 1999, Jean was also the director of the Celtic dimension of the *Atlas Linguarum Europae*. In 1988, Jean was nominated by the France's prestigious *Centre National de Recherche Scientifique* as the director of the regional linguistic atlases of France. His insatiable curiosity about language contact and cross-cultural exchanges prompted him to co-author the two-volume *Atlas linguistique des Petites Antilles* (2011) with Guylaine Brun-Trigaud (CNRS, University of Nice) dedicated to documenting the French-based creoles spoken in the French Antilles (Saint-Barthélemy, Guadeloupe and Martinique).

Over the years, Jean never forgot his roots and remained ever-faithful to his Plougrescant *badume*. In 2012, he published a monumental two-volume Breton-French / French-Breton dictionary (1,038 pages) on the Breton of his parish. It represents a lifetime of patient fieldwork and each entry is presented in an easy-to-read, phonetically accurate Breton orthography that he conceived especially to facilitate the task of those unable to read standard Breton. This should be required reading for anyone seeking an in-depth understanding of the language and is a wonderful complement to Jules Gros' volumes on Tregor Breton.

As a university professor, Jean left an indelible mark on several generations of students who discovered the Breton language through his eyes, not as the language of a down-trodden Celtic people struggling to preserve their language and culture against their traditional French enemies, but rather in the timeless, practical and down-to-earth way it was (and still is) viewed by the peasantry and fisher folk who spoke/speak it naturally as their first language.

Well-known internationally, he was a frequent speaker for decades at colloquia, conferences and seminars around the world. Jean's affable nature was apparent even in these formal academic settings but he was perhaps happiest exchanging, bantering and joking with the everyday people he encountered at home and abroad. He loved spontaneous encounters and was as eager to learn from his interlocutors—regardless of their social status—as he was to share his vast knowledge, but always in a humorous, matter-of-fact way. His love of language simply reflected his love of people.

Never would I have imagined when I first asked Jean to contribute an article to *Celto-Slavica* on his ALF study that I would now be writing his obituary. Tragically, he unexpectedly passed away near his home while taking a walk with his wife, Françoise, on the morning of May 6, 2020. This short account offers a mere glimpse into his rich and productive life. Hopefully, it also conveys some idea to the reader not only of his scholarly accomplishments but also his humanity and kindness. He will be sorely missed.