

‘SKY’ AND ‘HEAVENS’ IN BRETON ORAL TRADITION

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0. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to trace the linguistic development of two terms deriving from IE **nem-* in Breton: *neñv* ‘heavens’ and *nemet* ‘sacred’.¹ This development, attested from the Old Breton into the modern language, seems, in these two instances, to present a particular example of the Christian influence on the vocabulary of spoken and written Breton. While *neñv* was integrated in the vocabulary of the priests and was employed to mark the opposition between the heavens and the sky (ModB *oabl*), *nemet* disappeared from the language and the notion of ‘holy’, ‘sacred’ was explained by a Latin term *sacrum* > ModB *sakr*. Without any doubt, the etymology of the stem **nem-* deserves special treatment; however, we shall not be attempting in making a reconstruction of the IE stem and the archaic concept of holiness. The aim of this paper is more specific – we shall just try making a step towards our better understanding of the factors that had influenced the development of this stem in Breton.

1. The notion of sacred place and the heavens

The distinction between *oabl* ‘sky’ and *neñv* ‘heavens’ in modern oral tradition in Brittany is quite clear. The term *neñv* marks the idea of a sacred space both in religious texts and in oral tradition and is nowadays part of the Christian cosmology. The OB *nemet* > Middle Breton stem *nevet-* can be found in the place names, such as the forest called Koad Nevet, or the *silva nemet* from the Cartulaire de Quimperlé. We can find this stem in the Welsh *nyfed* ‘sacred’, in the Old Irish *nemed* ‘privilege’, and the Gaulish *nemeton* ‘temple’ often figuring as a part of personal names (e.g. *Nemeto-gena*, *Nemeto-marus*) and place-names (*Augustonemetum*; *Medionemetum* etc.). The notion of the heavens as opposed to the sky seems to be common for the Celtic languages: Old Welsh *nef*, Old Cornish *nef*, Old Breton *nem*, Middle Breton *neff*. In Old Irish, the opposition between the sky and the heavens is not so clear, OI *nem* having two meanings.

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According to Vendryes, this stem initially had the meaning of a sacred part of the world and derived from an IE stem **nem-*:

OI *nemet* « sanctuaire, lieux consacré » <...> Le mot a pris aussi le sens d'endroit privilégié, d'où «privilège, talent » <...> Le mot existait en gaulois νεμετον <...> toutefois si les formes comme *de sacris silvarum quae nimidas uocant* et *silva quae uocatur Nemet* prêtent un rapprochement avec lat. *nemus* « bois sacré », gr. *nemos* n. «bois » d'une rac. **nem-* signifiant « partager » ou **nem-* « courber ». Voir *nem* « ciel » (LEIA N-9).

Vendryes also provides the following etymology of the OI *nem* 'sky, heavens':

Ancien thème en – es, pour lequel deux explications sont possibles: soit qu'on rapproche skr. *nabhah* n « nuage » gr. νέφος « id », vsl. *nebo*, gen. *nebesa* en supposant une alliteration de *bh* en *m* (...) ou bien skr. *namah* « inclination, hommage » d'une racine **nem-* « courber » le ciel étant considéré comme une voûte (LEIA N-8).

So, according to Vendryes, *nemet* can be derived from the **nem-* 'vault, heavens'. This seems to be quite probable: the vault of heavens is a sacred location *par excellence*. The Breton material shows that the opposition between the holy heavens and the sky existed in the OB and still is attested in the modern language.

2. The evolution of the stem **nem-* in Breton written tradition

The adjective *neved* 'sacred' is not used in modern Breton and is replaced by the word *sakr* (< Lat. *sacrum*). Probably *nemet* had strong pre-Christian connotations and was applied to the notion of a 'pagan place' as opposed to the 'Christian holy place'. Nowadays, some modern Breton writers try to re-introduce the word *nevet* in the sense of "a sacred space in a non-Christian religion" (e.g. an example can be invoked – 'a place worshipped by North American Indians').

The word *neñv* is used in ModB in a strictly religious context, and is opposed to *oabl* which is used only outside the religious context. This difference is clearly marked in F. Favereau's dictionary, where *neñv* is translated into French like "ciel, cieux" and *oabl* as "ciel météo" (GBV).

All available translations of the Bible into Breton used *neñv* for 'heavens'. One of the examples is the translation of the New Testament made by Maodez Glanndour. Although the author used a purified version of the language and followed the norms of the written practice of the Gwalarn movement (often being criticised for the tendency towards modernisation of the language which made their works hardly

understandable for the Breton speakers), his translation of the Holy Bible was based on the works of several predecessors and followed the established tradition of the Biblical translation.

Jesus o pignat d'an Neñv

Hag evel ma oant eno troet o sell etrezek an neñv d'e welout o vont kuit, setu en em gavas dirazo daou zen gwisket e gwenn, a lavaras: « Gwazed Galilea, perak e chomit aze de sellout ouzh an Neñv? Hennezh, Jesus, hag a zo bet savet diouzhoc'h d'an Neñv, a zeuy en-dro evel-se e-giz m'hoc'h eus e welet o vont kuit d'an Neñv » (Ar Bibl Santel 1971: 281-282).

Acts

And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven (trans. from King James Bible).

The most known biblical text available in several translations since the seventeenth century is 'The Lord's Prayer':

Hon Tad
 c'hwi hag a zo **en Neñv**,
 ra vo santelaet hoc'h ano.
 Ra zeuio ho Rouantelezh.
 Ra vo graet ho youl war an douar evel en neñv.
 Roit dimp hizio bara hor bevañs.
 Distaolit dimp hon dleoù
 evel m' hor bo ivez distaolet d' hon dleourion.
 Ha n' hon lezit ket da vont gant an temptadur,
 met hon dieubit eus an Droug.

In early versions *en Neñv* is often written as 'en *eff*', 'enn *env*'. This way of translation of the Lord's prayer has some rare exceptions, when instead of *en Neñv* one can observe the word *acoun* which probably stands for a variation of *kouñamb*, a word coming (according to Favereau) from a dialectal form *koabr* in the dialect of Vannes corresponding to *oabl* in KLT dialects (GBV) or a derivate from the OB *cun* 'top' (DGVB).

3. The evolution of the stem **nem-* in Breton oral tradition

We have no examples of the use of *nevet* in the modern oral tradition. On the contrary, *neñv* is used in the ballads and religious songs. One of the

examples is the well-known song *Ar Baradoz* present in a number of songbooks and often sang nowadays at the funerals:

*Pa sellan en neñvoù,
Hag etrezek va bro,
Nijal di a garfen,
Evel ur goulmig wenn.*

When I look at the heavens
And at my homeland
I'd like to fly there
Like a white dove

But in some contexts it is not very clear if in the modern oral tradition and the spoken language *oabl* has the strict meaning of the sky, “ciel météo”, or this meaning may be extended and there can be confusion between *oabl* and *neñv*. D. Giraudon (1995) gives some examples of jokes from Poullaouen:

Ma koues an neñv war an douar, ar a vras a vo tapet da gentañ
If heavens fall on the earth the tall people will be struck before the others

Ma kouezfe an neñv war an douar nem daol war da gof tre div rizenn patatez, to drouk ebet
If heavens falls on the earth you should lay down on your stomach between two rows of potatoes and you will be safe.

In this context the choice between *oabl* and *neñv* seems to be obvious: the heavens falling on the earth are considered to be God's punishment. But at the same time D. Giraudon (1995) gives some examples where bad omens appeared in the sky and not in the heavens. According to him, in 1938 and 1939 the sky was illuminated and the appearance of the red colour in the sky was interpreted by the countryside dwellers like a portent of the Second World War, meaning:

*Fuloret eo an oabl d'an abardaez,
Brezel a vo adarre!*

The evening sky is angry,
A war will come once again

Or:

Gwad zo barzh an oabl, ur poull gwad a zo barzh an oabl
There is blood in the sky, a pool of blood.

In this context it is difficult to provide a clear explanation in relation to the choice of the word *oabl*: does this portent coming from the Heavens signify a punishment or is it an explanation of a certain meteorological phenomenon?

4. Conclusion

The evidence of the two derivatives from the stem **-nem* can illustrate the influence of the extralinguistic factors on the evolution of the lexemes. The better understanding of the causes of such influence can be a step towards our better understanding of the origin and the function of Latin loanwords in Breton.

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Abbreviations

- DIL** – *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, ed. E. G. Quin, Dublin: RIA, 1983 (repr. 1990; 1998).
- DGVB** – *Dictionnaire des Gloses en Vieux Breton*, ed. Léon Fleuriot, Paris, 1964.
- GBV** – *Geriadur brezhoneg-galleg, galleg-brezhoneg / Dictionnaire du breton contemporain bilingue*, ed. Francis Favereau, Montroules, 1993.
- LEIA** – *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien. MNOP*, ed. Joseph Vendryes, Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies & Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1960.

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