

Irrational obstinacy

At the end of this summer, a summary note to the Minister of National Education and Youth concerning the teaching of Breton in Diwan schools was leaked, and its content provoked such an outcry in Brittany that it seems wise to examine its content carefully.

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What strikes the reader at first glance is the paradoxical nature of this memo to the minister, written by inspectors general Yves Bernabé and Sonia Dubourg-Lavroff. Indeed, after establishing in the first part that the teaching method used at Diwan is about three times more effective for learning Breton than that used in public and private Catholic schools, the second part recommends that it be abolished and proposes a range of restrictive measures to achieve this.

At Diwan, all subjects except modern languages are taught in Breton, which is also used in everyday school life. According to the note to the minister, this "immersive" method enables 65.4% of pupils to become advanced users of the

¹ Bernabé Yves and Dubourg-Lavroff Sonia, Immersion teaching of a regional modern language: the Diwan network, note no. 2019-053 to the Minister of National Education and Youth, July 2019 (thirteen pages).

bret on². This is 2.4 times more than pupils in bilingual streams in state education (26.8% only of whom become advanced users³) and even 3.5 times more than those in Catholic private education ue (of whom barely 18.8% become advanced users⁴). These last two streams have in common that they implement equal teaching hours: a maximum of 50% of lessons are taught in Breton, and French is the language used in school life.

However, not only does the report reveal that pupils at Diwan schools have a much better level of Breton than those at schools that practise equal hours, but it also shows that they perform very well in other areas: high levels of French and mathematics, above-average results in the Brevet (secondary school certificate) and above-average results in the Baccalauréat (A-level equivalent). Unfortunately, the report does not compare Diwan's results in these areas with those of public and private schools that offer equal hours of instruction. One wonders why. Would they also be better in French and mathematics? If they were less good, in any case, would this not have been highlighted in the report to the minister?

In any case, after reporting on the superiority of the results of the immersive method over those of equal hours for learning Breton (and showing that it produced very good results in other subjects), it would seem logical for the authors of the note to propose

² Ibid., p. 2.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

the Minister to extend the possibility of experimenting with this method to public schools that wish to do so (as is already the case in several public nursery schools in Corsica, the Basque Country and the Pyrénées Orientales). However, this is not the case. The paradox, as we have said, is that they propose to eradicate it.

This paradox, however, can be resolved in two ways. Either the grade rationally serves an unspoken purpose: to reduce the effectiveness of learning Breton. We hope that this is not the case. Or, it is not based on purely rational logic. In fact, the authors seem to believe that the abstract formula "50-50" (i.e. at least 50% of lessons in French, at most 50% of lessons in Breton) will miraculously lead pupils to bilingualism. This is somewhat reminiscent of magical thinking, i.e. the belief that certain thoughts can make wishes come true (assuming, of course, that the authors and recipients of the note want the pupils concerned to become bilingual in French and Breton). In any case, it is striking that the authors take no account in their comments of the objective data at their disposal:

- neither their own figures, which reveal that pupils who have followed a programme of equal hours (in public and private Catholic schools) are far from becoming bilingual;
- nor the sociolinguistic context, which is characterised by the collapse of the transmission of Breton within families and the omnipresence of French in society. Pupils in the three bilingual streams (Diwan, state and private Catholic) are therefore completely immersed in the French language, which is almost always their first language (which explains why Diwan considers that they need a

significant amount of Breton input to achieve bilingualism). Paradox and magical thinking, however, do not stand alone: they feed on distortions and confusions scattered throughout the note.

Firstly, there are a few minor historical and legal inaccuracies: according to the note, the 1958 Constitution states that the language of the Republic is French; in reality, it was not until 1992 that Article 2 of the Constitution was amended to this effect. Article 2 also requires that "French be the dominant language of education"; however, it simply states that "the language of the Republic is French", which is not quite the same thing.

Secondly, there is a major semantic distortion: throughout the note, the authors act as if the word

"bilingualism" is synonymous with "equal teaching hours", which is completely inaccurate. The definition of bilingualism is, in fact, as follows: "The ability to speak two languages fluently; the resulting state or situation."

This leads to a strange pedagogical confusion: the authors act as if bilingualism were merely a means to an end — equal teaching hours — rather than an end in itself: the ability to speak two languages fluently. This is just as absurd as saying that what matters in primary school is teaching reading, writing and arithmetic, but not the end goal of this learning: the fact that children know how to read, write and count!

Finally, this note to the minister is characterised by a real confusion of genres: its authors constantly and intimately mix pedagogy, administrative standards and political doctrine, to the point where it is

possible to distinguish between them in their remarks — and one wonders whether they themselves can distinguish between them. This explains the remarkable reversal they engage in, whereby they end up criticising Diwan schools for the excesses that characterise their own note.

Firstly, while the note to the minister is inherently paradoxical, its authors criticise Diwan for finding itself in a "paradoxical situation". Indeed, they write, the Diwan network "fulfils educational service missions, but is legally in breach of the law". However, if we can indeed speak of a paradox here, it is not in the sense that the authors mean, but rather in the etymological sense of the term (para, "against", and doxa, "common opinion"). What is paradoxical, in fact, is the effectiveness with which Diwan fulfils its educational mission, because this contradicts preconceived notions. On the other hand, the contradiction with the law that the authors of the note denounce is not the result of a paradox but of a political process, which we will return to later.

Then — while the tone of the note to the minister sometimes seems to border on magical thinking — its authors ironically point out that Diwan teaches in Breton, "relying on the magic of contact between the French and Breton languages to build bilingualism". This reversal is all the more amusing given that they themselves noted, on the one hand, that at Diwan, where two-thirds of pupils achieve bilingualism, "the rules of language are taught with a certain degree of effectiveness from the first year of primary school onwards, using Breton as a basis", while, on the other hand, the formula they advocate (at least 50% of lessons in French, at most 50% in Breton) leads only a minority of pupils in

public and private Catholic schools achieve bilingualism. According to them, the magic of the immersive programme seems to be more effective than the magic of the parallel programme!

Finally, as we have seen, the authors of the note have used the term "bilingualism" in an erroneous sense (according to which a school can only be described as bilingual if it uses both languages equally), they go on to criticise Diwan for not conforming to this inaccurate approach and for implementing a teaching method that actually leads pupils to become fluent in two languages, i.e. to become bilingual!

How should we interpret these astonishing reversals? Is it illusionism or illusio? In other words, is it a deliberate process or a more or less unconscious act? Illusionism, the art of conjurers, consists of deliberately and artificially creating illusions to deceive the audience. Illusio, on the other hand, is the adherence of a social agent to the norms and values that govern their field of belonging. Obviously, it is impossible to decide one way or the other, as this would require probing the minds of the authors. However, the permutations of meaning they employ in their note to the minister are so implausible that they lend credence to the illusio hypothesis. So, in fact, when these two members of a large state body, under the direct authority of the minister, take it for granted that bilingualism means equal teaching hours, their conception seems illusory to any reader who does not belong to their world — whether they are an educator, a parent of a pupil, or an ordinary citizen who has consulted a simple dictionary — because they know full well that bilingualism is, in reality, the common practice of two languages. Here we find what was said by

Pierre Bourdieu: "Illusio is what is perceived as obvious and appears as an illusion to those who do not share this obviousness because they do not participate in the game."

This brings us to the heart of the matter: beyond the pedagogical embellishments with which it is adorned, this note to the Minister of Education is, in reality, fundamentally political.

Firstly, it responds to a political mandate. It follows a request from the Minister of Education comprising two parts: on the one hand, he requested an "analysis of Diwan's results and teaching practices" and, on the other hand, "information aimed at establishing the Ministry's general position on managing its relations with networks practising immersive teaching". In less circumspect terms, it seems likely that Jean-Michel Blanquer – who is opposed to immersive education – wanted, on the one hand, to obtain information that he could have used against Diwan if it had proved unfavourable (which, unfortunately for him, was not the case) and, on the other hand, to obtain ideas for bringing immersive education into line (which was provided to him by the inspectors general). This makes the paradoxical nature of the memo easier to understand: it was only intended to provide ammunition for the minister (and should never have been leaked).

Secondly, this note contains omissions (or underestimations) of political factors. Its authors neglect the determined effort made by the French state to eliminate regional languages, merely mentioning, in

estimates). Its authors neglect the determined effort made by the French state to eliminate regional languages, merely mentioning in passing that "the national education system no longer rejects the Breton language". They also underestimate the seriousness of the situation in which this

language, now classified as "seriously endangered" by UNESCO: for them, the threat to Breton is merely a "feeling", which they associate with "regionalist movements". Finally, they ignore the fact that the first paragraph of Article 2 of the Constitution — which they invoke like a mantra ("The language of the Republic is French") — is being used against the will of the legislature. This paragraph was added to the Constitution in 1992, in the context of the referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, in order to combat the influence of English. During the debates in the Assembly, the then Minister of Justice guaranteed that "no harm would be done to the policy of respecting the diversity of our regional cultures" as a result of its adoption. However, this paragraph has never been used against English, but always against regional languages.

Thirdly, the logic behind the note is political. Admittedly, its authors level what appears to be an educational criticism at Diwan when they point out that "bilingualism [there] is presented as an end goal, but is not implemented as such in teaching". Establishing bilingualism "as such" in teaching could, in fact, be fruitful: one can imagine courses where the languages would be compared with each other through lessons in comparative grammar, for example. If such teaching were provided in public or private Catholic schools, it would be appropriate for Diwan to take inspiration from it... But this is not the case! The only difference between immersive teaching (at Diwan) and equal teaching time (in public and private Catholic schools) is actually the number of hours of Breton provided by these two methods. And the result is that students in immersive education most often become

bilingual, while those in mixed-language education are much less successful. The seemingly pedagogical criticism that bilingualism should be established "as such" is therefore in reality nothing more than a pretext to conceal the political nature of the argument. What Diwan is really being criticised for is simply exceeding the regulations which "stipulate that the number of hours of teaching in the regional language must not exceed that of teaching in French": Diwan must comply with the rule, and that's that! This rule stems from the law (the first paragraph of Article 2 of the Constitution), which, interpreted in a manner inconsistent with the opinion of the legislator, has been turned into a weapon of war against regional languages. But when laws are bad, shouldn't they be changed? The authors of the note certainly mention the fact that it is appropriate for the State "to enforce the law or to change it", but they immediately abandon the second option ("change" the law) to focus exclusively on its first option ("enforce the law") and, in this regard, detail a range of measures designed to bring Diwan into line.

It should be noted that the note to the minister, although it was only leaked

this summer, was drafted in 2019, at the very moment when Paul Molac, MP for Morbihan, announced his intention to table a bill on the protection and promotion of regional languages, which advocated immersive teaching. Could it be that the sole purpose of Bernabé and Dubourg-Lavroff's memo was to arm the minister for his fight against this bill? In any case, the bill was ultimately adopted (without any modification) to a very large majority by

On 8 April 2021, Jean-Michel Blanquer secretly encouraged some sixty parliamentarians from the presidential majority to lodge an appeal with the Constitutional Council, which led, in particular, to a challenge to immersion on the basis of the famous first paragraph of Article 2 of the Constitution, which states that "the language of the Republic is French".

The war on idioms that began in France during the Reign of Terror (1793 and 1794) and was then implemented by the Third Republic (from 1870 to 1940) was explained by the fact that French was hardly spoken at the time and that the revolutionaries, and later the republicans, wanted

"destroy dialects" as part of a "conscious programme of nation building and patriotic education". Today, however, with regional languages dying out, the linguistic obstinacy of a handful of French civil servants seems irrational. Could it be a sign of identity drift? Nationalism, wrote historian Raoul Girardet, "does not tolerate diversity, plurality of options, loyalties or affiliations". The note by Bernabé and Dubourg-Lavroff was just one tool among many in the service of this irrational obstinacy.

