

# **An Analysis of the Linguistic Phylogeny of Breton**

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## **Abstract**

*The claim that Modern Breton is directly descended from ancient Gaulish, a much older Celtic language, is one that has been made by a number of otherwise respectable Breton linguists. They have been influenced by a desire to create a national identity for the Bretons, one that includes a rich linguistic history. The linguistic evidence, however, clearly refutes this claim, and places Breton as a descendant of Brythonic, along with Welsh and Cornish. An examination of some of the major sound changes in Brythonic and Gaulish confirms the generally accepted phylogeny.*

## **Introduction**

Throughout the world, language is very closely tied to culture. This is even more true in the communities of linguistic minorities, where their cultural heritage in a large part depends on maintaining their linguistic independence. Unfortunately, this nationalist mentality, while good for protecting an endangered language, can lead to unscientific interpretations of linguistic data. One of the more famous examples is Basque, in which some linguists have made the claim that it is a nearly unchanged form of Proto-Indo-European, or perhaps even Proto-World. In addition to a dearth of linguistic data supporting these claims, there is conflicting evidence in the historical record.

A similar situation has arisen more recently with Breton, a Celtic language spoken in the rural regions of Brittany in France. Breton has been suppressed for many years by France's official language policies, although it is not yet a moribund language. In the last century, there has even been a resurgence in the production of Breton literature and poetry. In order to promote a

nationalist agenda, the Breton linguist François Falc'hun proposed that Breton was the direct descendant of ancient Gaulish (Macaulay, 371), a Celtic language spoken in France at the time of the Roman conquest of France, then the province of Gaul. Gaulish was also a contemporary of Brythonic, the ancestor of Breton, Cornish, and Welsh.

This view is simply incorrect, and although there may remain a small handful of Gaulish elements in Modern Breton, they were not inherited, but borrowed. Breton and Gaulish are definitely related, as they are both descendants of p-Celtic, the branch of the Celtic language family where PIE  $*k^w > *p$  (Macaulay, 5). Gaulish is also a p-Celtic language, so it is more closely related to Breton than any of the other non-Brythonic Celtic languages, which are classified as q-Celtic. That is where the similarities end; Gaulish is a continental Celtic language, whereas Breton is insular, a distinction that reflects the history of Celtic as it spread across western Europe, but later becoming largely isolated to the British Isles.

After a brief discussion of the history of Breton and Gaulish, their linguistic differences will be examined. These will conclusively show that Breton is not a descendant of Gaulish, as posited by some nationalist linguists.

## **History of Breton**

At the end of the 4th century AD, the Britons lived in the southwestern region of post-Roman Britain. Over the next 200 years, many of them migrated to the Continent, under pressure from expanding Anglo-Saxon territory in eastern England and coastal raids performed by Pictish- and Scottish-speaking tribes from Ireland. The Briton settlers quickly integrated with the Armoricans (who spoke Vulgar Latin), a transition eased by their common status as Roman citizens and as

Christians (Galliou, 128). These two groups quickly became known as the Bretons, and the region became Britannica, now Brittany. They spoke a form of Old Breton, a close descendant of Brythonic. An army of Bretons even went to battle with Roman soldiers in an attempt to repel the invading Franks, a Germanic tribe moving into northern Gaul.

Breton managed to resist the powerful influence of French throughout the middle ages, with even 16th century Middle Breton retaining a predominantly Celtic vocabulary, with very few loan words from Romance or Germanic languages (Galliou, 144). Starting with the Frankish Carolingian dynasty, Brittany fell under (largely) French control, and remained in that state under a string of kings and dukes.

The greatest threat to the Breton language did not actually arise until the formation of the First French Republic in 1792. The period of French nationalism that followed, including the Napoleonic Wars, encouraged equality of the people in all aspects of their lives. This including the institution of a common language: French. In the case of the Bretons, the French language was forced upon them through the educational system. Only recently has Breton become more accepted in formal education in Brittany, although it is still an endangered language.

### **History of Gaulish**

The Gauls were a presence in what is now modern-day France by at the latest 1000 BC. They were an offshoot of the ancient Celts who migrated westward across Europe, although they remained on the Continent. Gauls were responsible for the sacking of Rome in 390 BC, and Gauls were also present in Iberia, and some even found their way to Asia Minor, in a region that was known as Galatia at the time of Paul's Epistles.

Julius Caesar was responsible for the Roman conquest of Gaul by 51 BC, a rule which

continued until the Frankish invasions of 486 AD. The Gauls quickly adapted to life under imperial rule, and abandoned Gaulish in favor of Latin. The similarity between the two languages, both members of the Italo-Celtic family, was sufficient to make the transition fairly smooth. Gaulish has been extinct since the period of Roman rule, although some loan words may have survived into Modern Breton (Galliou, 145).

### **Linguistic Comparison**

Essentially, this issue is one of phylogeny. In the case discussed here, there are two possible trees: one in which Breton and Welsh are both Brythonic languages, and Gaulish is a now-dead offshoot of p-Celtic, and one in which Breton is the modern descendant of Gaulish, as proposed by Falc'hun. The difference between these two phylogenies is illustrated in Figure 1, where the former is Phylogeny A and the latter is Phylogeny B. Both of these are theoretically valid phylogenies, but there is a lot of evidence that makes Phylogeny much more widely accepted.

Breton uses an SVO ordering, unlike any of the other modern Celtic languages, which use VSO (Macaulay, 386). Gaulish also used SVO, but it is more likely that Breton's unusual (for Celtic languages) ordering is a result of its close contact with French, an SVO language. Although this is an interesting fact about the languages under scrutiny, the placename and sound change evidence covered in this section is far more telling.

Breton is broken up into a number of highly distinct dialects, which is somewhat unusual for a language spoken in such a small geographic area. The three northern dialects are Léon, Kernev, and Treger, and are all fairly similar. The southern dialect, Gwened (or Vannetais) is much more divergent (Press, 2). The geographic distribution of the dialects is in a large part the origin of Falc'hun's claim regarding Breton's ancestry. He believed that the only way to explain Vannetais'

unusual separation from the other three dialects was that it had been influenced by absorbing elements of ancient Gaulish at the time of the arrival of the Britons in Armorica.

As in many historical linguistics studies, evidence of an older state of the language can be found in modern-day placenames, which tend to be preserved. Gaulish placenames tended to end in -acos, which became -acum during the Gallo-Roman period, to largely match Latin placenames. As Vulgar Latin evolved into French, -acum became -ay, -y, or -é. The arrival of the Briton settlers, speaking a Celtic language, helped maintain an intermediate stage of that transformation: -ac. This suffix is still present today, in the forms -oc, -euc, -uc, and -ec (Galliou, 138). The distribution of placenames is such that these are found largely in western Brittany, the area farthest from the encroaching French influence. With a reduced incidence of loan words, western Brittany is very likely the region that best preserves Celtic elements in the Breton language.

The placename example is an element of Gaulish that has survived into Modern Breton, but it does not mean that Breton is a descendant of Gaulish. In publishing his claim, Falc'hun did call attention to the presence of some connection between these two Celtic languages, one that had been largely ignored by other scholars. In order to refute his claims, they were forced to study the possibility that there was a connection. Thus, although he challenged the canonical interpretation of the data with a highly dubious conclusion, Falc'hun did force another examination of more legitimate research into the origins of Breton.

One piece of evidence against Phylogeny B is found in the formation of noun cases. Gaulish had a gendered genitive case suffix: -i for feminine genitive, and -as for masculine genitive. It also had a general masculine ending -os. All three of these endings are not present in the Brythonic languages. Both Modern Welsh and Modern Breton do not use them. It is possible that this is a parallel development in Welsh, and in Breton descending from Gaulish, as opposed to a change in

Brythonic from p-Celtic. The loss of morphological characteristics, such as these case endings, is often a parallel innovation (Forster, 2).

It is also helpful to examine the consonant systems in use in the modern languages. Welsh has 22 consonant phonemes: /p b t d k g f v θ ð s ʃ ɸ x h tʃ dʒ m n ŋ l r/ (Macaulay, 321). Breton has 20 consonant phonemes: /p b t d k g f v s z ʒ ʒ x h m n ɲ l ʎ r/ (Macaulay, 428). These are fairly similar, with the exception of the affricates /tʃ dʒ/ in Welsh, which are loans from English, and the /ʒ ɲ ʎ/ in Breton, which are loans from French. Welsh and Breton are close relatives, and although they are influenced by the Germanic and Italic neighbors, respectively, it is unsurprising that they both have similar consonant systems.

The cognates in words for family members is more solid evidence that Welsh and Breton are closely related as Brythonic languages, whereas Gaulish is an ancient offshoot of p-Celtic. The word "mother" is <mam> in Modern Welsh, and <mamm> in Modern Breton, but <matir> in Gaulish (Forster, 3). There were two forms for "mother" in Proto-Celtic: \*mātīr and \*mammā. p-Celtic preserved both of these proto-forms, but Gaulish kept only \*mātīr, whereas Brythonic kept only \*mammā. Both Breton and Welsh lost the word-final -ā in this case. It could be a parallel innovation, but the use of \*mammā for "mother" was probably a common innovation in Brythonic (Jenkins, 80).

Even more obvious are the cognates for "daughter": Gaulish duxtir, Welsh merch, and Breton merc'h. Note that <x>, <ch>, and <c'h> all represent /x/ (Forster, 3). The Gaulish duxtir is probably a loan word from another Indo-European language, because the Proto-Celtic form for "daughter" is \*merkā (Jenkins, 30). Again, we see the loss of word-final ā, as well as k > x, in both Welsh and Breton. The same sound changes apply to Proto-Celtic "horse" or \*markā, which

is marka in Gaulish, and march and marc'h in Welsh and Breton, respectively (Jenkins, 63) (Whatmough) (Nodine) (Press, 361). It is unclear where the Gaulish form for "daughter" came from, but it must either be a loan word or a mistaken attribution. Still, in this case we see further similarities between the vocabulary of Welsh and Breton, as well as some common sound changes that probably occurred to their common ancestor Brythonic.

There are other examples of cognates in Modern Welsh (ModW), Modern Breton (ModB), Proto-Celtic (PCIt), and Gaulish (Gal). ModB garan, ModW garan, PCIt \*garanu and Gal \*garanus (ModE crane), where Gaulish preserves the final vowel of the proto-form, which is lost in both Breton and Welsh (Forster, 3) (Jenkins, 28). ModB nerzh, ModW nerth, PCIt \*nerto and Gal \*nertos (ModE strength), where Gaulish again adds a word-final s. Breton and Welsh differ in the articulation of the word-final fricative, but in the consonant systems described above, Breton has /ʒ/ and not /θ/, whereas Welsh has the reverse. Presumably p-Celtic \*t went to these two fricatives in Welsh and Breton, but was still /t/ in the older Gaulish (Press, 366) (Nodine) (Jenkins, 122) (Whatmough) (Macaulay).

## **Conclusion**

There is more than sufficient evidence to phylogenetically place Breton as a descendant of Brythonic, along with Welsh and Cornish. This is the Phylogeny A as depicted in Figure 1. The roots of Gaulish lie farther back on the Celtic language tree, and while there is some evidence that elements of ancient Gaulish have survived into modern-day Breton, it did not occur through inheritance.

The historical evidence also cannot be ignored; Gaulish was effectively replaced by Latin during the Roman conquest of Gaul, which occurred almost 500 years before the migration of

Britons from Britain to Brittany. This fact alone should convince any linguist who doubts the canonical interpretation of the phylogeny.

Breton is not a descendant of Gaulish, but it is sensible from a nationalist point of view to make that claim. By giving your nation over two millennia of linguistic continuity, you engender a certain amount of pride in its citizens. While this is in some ways an admirable goal, it is by no means linguistically valid. The comparative method has given a reconstructed tree of the Celtic language family that clearly separates the origins of Breton from the branch containing Gaulish. They are clearly related, but Gaulish is most definitely not an ancestor of Breton.

### **References**

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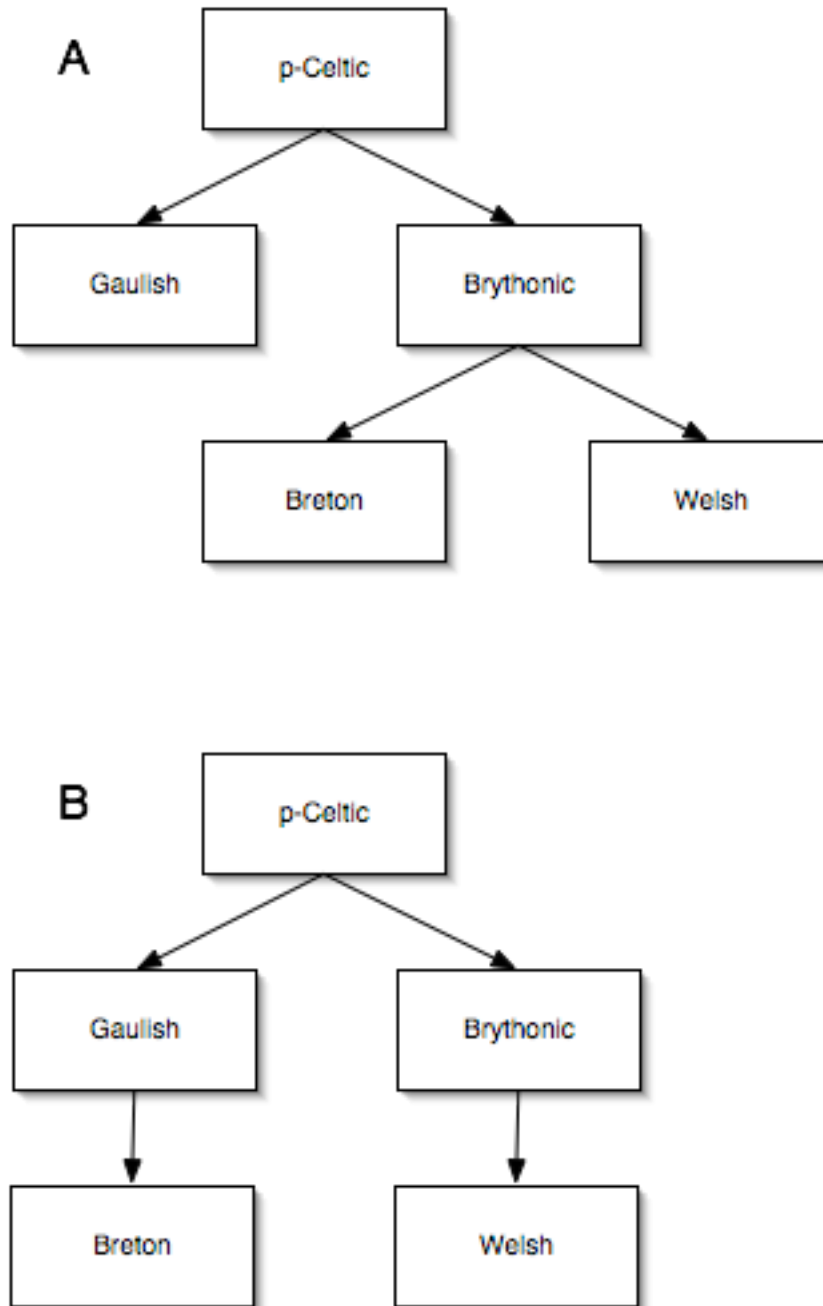
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**Figure 1.** Two simplified phylogenies showing the relationship between Gaulish and Breton. Phylogeny A is the widely accepted version, with Breton and Welsh both grouped as Brythonic languages. Phylogeny B is the version proposed by Falc’hun, in which Breton is the modern descendant of Gaulish, a contemporary of Brythonic.