

‘It won’t be the Guernsey French we know’: identity issues and language endangerment*

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Abstract. This article looks at the role language plays in identity, and examines the effects of identity on revitalisation efforts in the context of a small and dwindling language community. The paper first reviews the historical and sociolinguistic background of the community in question and outlines the research methodology. It then discusses the nature and inter-relationship of identity, ethnicity and culture, and their roles in language choice and attitudes, before relating these to the ethnolinguistic vitality of the indigenous language in Guernsey.

1. Introduction

It is often assumed that language plays a significant part in identity, but this view is not necessarily consistent with the language shift taking place in many places around the world. Krauss (1992) estimates that 90% of the world’s languages will have disappeared by 2010; each instance means that individuals and groups are giving up their languages. This paper considers to what extent this entails the loss of part of their identity, and the role of identity in language maintenance.

1.1 Background

This paper focuses on language shift on Guernsey, a small island in the English Channel. Guernsey is the second largest of the Channel Islands, in the Gulf of St. Malo off the coast of northern France (see the map in Figure 1). Guernsey is the second largest of the Channel Islands, off the coast of northern France. However, its political allegiance is to Great Britain, although it is self-governing in domestic policy.

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The main industries at present are finance (Guernsey is a tax haven) and tourism, but before the Second World War the economy was based on agriculture and horticulture. The Channel Islands are not part of the UK and have their own parliaments which regulate local affairs, although they are dependent on the UK for foreign policy. The Islands are only associate members of the European Community, and are not subject to European laws and agreements such as the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. Political autonomy has not increased the status of the indigenous vernacular, nor has it stopped it from declining. Guernsey French is now at around level 7 on Fishman's (1991) 8-point scale of language endangerment, i.e. most native speakers are past child-bearing age. It has no official status and its existence is largely ignored by the island government.



*Fig. 1 Geographical location of Guernsey
(source: http://cooperbrouard.com/buying_map.htm)*

Guernsey French is a variety of Norman French, related to the varieties spoken in other Channel Islands and in mainland Normandy, with which it is to a large extent mutually comprehensible. Norman has been spoken in the Channel Islands for at least a thousand years. English is a relatively recent newcomer: in the 18th century Methodist missionaries found very few people who could understand English (Marquis 1997), and even in the first half of the 20th century Norman French was still used for all day-to-day purposes outside the main town. Linguistic and cultural shift accelerated in the 20th century and the islands are now almost completely Anglicised.

The Channel Islands have been a bastion of the British Crown against France since 1204, when they ‘chose’ to remain linked to England instead of mainland Normandy, which had been conquered by the French king Philippe Auguste.¹ The islands were heavily fortified and withstood numerous attempts at invasion from France. This inevitably had an effect on the islanders’ view of themselves in terms of national identity, which may explain the rapid acceptance of English once it gained a foothold.

My paper in *Reading Working Papers in Linguistics* 6 (Sallabank 2002) goes into some detail about the history of Guernsey, which I will not repeat here. However, the history of immigration into the island is particularly relevant to the development of its language and identity.

In the Middle Ages, Norman was an important international language and was spoken by all classes. However, from the 16th century onwards, Standard French was promoted by the French monarchy. In the 17th century Protestant refugees fled to Guernsey from religious persecution in France. At that time Guernsey was ruled by a strict Puritan ‘theocracy’ (which almost wiped out traditional songs and dances), who welcomed Calvinist preachers who were fluent in French. According to De Garis (1973:260 and personal communication), Standard French speakers thus gained positions of influence and introduced negative attitudes towards the indigenous vernacular. A stable diglossic relationship developed, with Standard French as the ‘High’ language and Guernsey French as the ‘Low’ vernacular. Nevertheless, although it was often despised, it is only since the introduction of English, in the early 19th century, that Guernsey French has been actually threatened.

Immigration from the UK started in the second half of the 18th century in connection with the entrepôt trade, and was facilitated by steamboat services from 1824, which made tourism from the UK feasible. ‘Polite society’ disdained the local dialect (Inglis 1835) and hoped that their daughters would marry British officers. Nevertheless, there was considerable intermarriage from the beginning, which brought English into the domestic domain for the first time. It was this which broke up the stable diglossia under which Guernsey French was the language of the home and of primary identification.

¹ In return, they gained the political and tax privileges which form the basis of the economy today.

1.2 Current sociolinguistic situation

According to the 2001 census, which was the first one ever to ask a language question, 14% of the total population of nearly 60,000 (1 in 7) have some understanding of Guernsey French, but only 2% speak it fluently. Most of these speakers are elderly, and there are relatively few second language learners due to the lack of official support and infrastructure for doing so, together with widespread negative attitudes towards the utility of Guernsey French.

I first conducted a ‘table-top’ pilot survey, interviewing forty residents of Guernsey (mostly native speakers of Guernsey French) and sending out a postal questionnaire to members of a local society which used to have a philology section (now defunct). This brought in 90 replies, just under half of which were from speakers. It has been said that data from postal responses is less reliable than face-to-face data, and admittedly it allows for less negotiation and discussion, but postal distribution allowed me to reach a more representative sample, including more isolated speakers (see below). The interviewees tended to be ‘primary contacts’, recruited by the ‘friend of a friend’ method, and many are active in the language revitalisation movement, so their views may not be typical of speakers of Guernsey French, and even less typical of non-speakers (who form the majority of the population). Informants recruited by the ‘friend of a friend’ method are also, by definition, part of a social network. Many speakers are elderly: the people they used to speak Guernsey French with have died, and they have few opportunities to speak it now. It might therefore be possible to get a skewed picture of the pattern of use if only socially integrated speakers were surveyed. However, I did manage to interview some isolated speakers as well as contacting them by post.

The core of the survey concerned the extent and contexts of the use of Guernsey French nowadays. The sampling differences between face-to-face and postal respondents were significant, as is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 How often do you speak Guernsey French?

	<i>Face-to-face interviewees</i>	<i>Postal respondents (speakers only)</i>
Every day	58%	3%
More than once a week	16%	19%
Less than once a week	21%	48%
Never	5%	23%

Half of the speakers who responded by post reported that they spoke Guernsey French less than once a week (not including the non-speakers). By comparison, 58% of the face-to-face interviewees said that they speak Guernsey French every day; nevertheless, a quarter speak it less than once a week. There is a community of retired people who still use Guernsey French for their entire social life, for example at ‘Darby and Joan’ clubs, whist and euchre drives, and playing bowls; but this contrasts sharply with the isolation felt by other elderly speakers.

Isolation is an increasing problem for endangered language communities, as the average age profile of speakers is rising, and the friends and relatives they used to speak with are passing away. For example, one interviewee said: ‘I’ve had nobody to speak it to since my mother died in 1995’. In addition, they are increasingly infirm and immobile. Over two-thirds of the Guernsey French-speaking postal respondents reported having 20 or fewer Guernsey French interlocutors. In contrast, two-thirds of the face-to-face interviewees reported having ‘at least 100’, ‘about 50’ or ‘many’.

Table 2 How many people do you speak Guernsey French with?

	<i>Face-to-face interviewees</i>	<i>Postal respondents (speakers only)</i>
At least 100	11%	0
About 50	28%	6%
"Many"/"several"	28%	24%
10 to 20	6%	12%
Under 10/ "not many"	28%	41%
None	0	18%

Since the pilot survey, I have expanded the questions ‘who speaks what language when, and where’ (Fishman 1965) to *why*. Previous language studies in Guernsey have focused on linguistic aspects of the local variety from the perspective of French dialectology, but I am analyzing its sociolinguistic situation according to a language endangerment paradigm, to find out how Guernsey French can learn from, and contribute to, a wider understanding of language maintenance and shift. A major question, which relates communities of use to questions of identity, is why some people maintain their ancestral language while others give it up. To this end I have moved towards a more ethnographic research style, focusing on the issue of identity.

2. Culture, ethnicity, identity and language

2.1 Culture

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss cultural theory in detail, but for its purposes a working definition of culture is ‘the material and social values of any group of people ... a patterned sphere of beliefs, values, symbols, and discourses’ which is autonomous and ‘cannot be explained away as a mere reflection of underlying economic forces, distributions of power, or social structural needs’ (Smith 2001:3-4). It can easily be seen that culture has close links with identity, which is ‘seen as a signifier at play in cultural fields rather than as a biological or psychological quality of individuals’ (ibid.:242). In the poststructural tradition, identities are ‘constructed by discourses and other cultural forces’ (ibid.:208).

2.2 Ethnicity

It is impossible to define ethnicity in terms of quantifiable physiological differences. Jenkins (1997:170) defines it as follows: ‘ethnicity and its allotropes are principles of collective identification and social organization in terms of culture and history, similarity and difference’. There is thus very little difference between ‘ethnicity’ and ‘culture’ as defined in 2.1. ‘Identity’ is included in this definition, indicating the intimate link between ethnicity and identity. However, as we shall see below, the interface is mostly one-way: although identity is a necessary part of ethnicity, ethnicity is not an essential feature of identity.

Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982:5) distinguish between an ‘old’ ethnicity based on common regional background and social networks which ‘joined people through clusters of occupational, neighbourhood, familial, and political ties’, and a ‘new’ ethnicity depending ‘less upon geographic proximity and shared occupations and more upon the highlighting of key differences separating one group from another’. This latter is very similar to Tajfel’s (1981:225) definition of social identity: ‘that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his [*sic.*] knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership’. It could be said that language shift often accompanies a shift from the first type of ethnicity to the second, which is more typical of modern societies.²

² It is also one reason why most of my interviewees so far have been minority language speakers, as their social networks are more close-knit.

Mackie (1996:15) points out that although we are all born with a self, we would each be very different if we had been born into a different culture, society, language, or set of circumstances: this is the influence of cultural and ethnic origin on identity.

2.3 Identity

There are many views on identity. Social constructivists often argue against the possibility of even studying self and identity objectively, whereas many psychologists and sociologists implicitly assume that they can be studied objectively (Jussim et al. 2001:5). This paper takes the second view (see below). It takes as a working definition that of Holland (1997:162): 'a self-understanding or self-objectification to which one is emotionally attached'. The importance of emotional attachment is underlined by Tajfel's definition of identity cited above; its relevance to minority languages will be investigated further in 3.2.

Many psychological texts on identity, such as Giddens (1991), Craib (1998) and Du Gay et al. (2000), scarcely mention language as a factor. Even Gumperz (ed. 1982) does not focus on a putative link between language loyalty and culture/ethnicity, but on the communicative production of identity through discourse (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 1982:1).

Nevertheless, in sociolinguistic literature a link between language and identity is often simply assumed and is treated as a given, with little discussion of its nature, and with a tendency to appeal to emotional responses (e.g. Krauss 1992, Skutnabb-Kangas 1999, Fishman 1989). Much of the recent theoretical work on identity has been done in the fields of literary theory (Moya and Hames-Garcia 2000) and feminism (Bucholz et al. 1999, which includes a chapter on Irish language revitalisation). The collection of papers edited by Moya and Hames-Garcia suggests a 'realist' view of identity, recognising as problematic the traditional essentialist view of identity as fixed: 'the tendency to posit one aspect of identity as the sole cause or determinant constituting the social meanings of an individual's experience' (Moya 2000:3). However, they also claim that deconstructionist and postmodern views of identity as an epistemologically unreliable construct are inadequate, since 'cultural identities can be enabling, enlightening, and enriching structures of attachment and feeling ... significant modes by which people experience, understand, and know the world' (ibid:8). Mohanty (2000:32) maintains that there is no necessary opposition between 'lived experience' and 'scientific thinking': 'theory-laden and socially constructed [interpretation of] experiences can lead to a

knowledge that is accurate and reliable' (ibid:36). He goes on to define identities as theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways; they are therefore valuable and their epistemic status should be taken seriously (ibid:43). A purely functional view of the world, which ignores emotional factors, can thus miss important information.

2.4 Language, identity and loyalty

Language is often thought to be purely about communication, a view promoted especially by the communicative language teaching movement of the last 25 years. We can communicate in any language; and from a purely functional viewpoint, the better known that language is, the easier communication is. This is a point of view often expressed in Guernsey by people who see the indigenous language as 'useless', both economically and functionally: it was 'holding people back'. Such views tend to be held by older people whose forebears shifted language for economic reasons, or whose ancestors were immigrants. When it is suggested that Guernsey French should be taught in schools, their reaction is often that it would be more useful to teach Standard French. They have no interest in the ancestral language as a marker of identity or as a link to island roots. On the other hand, very few of them would describe themselves as English. As Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985:239-40) note, feelings of ethnic identity *can* survive total language loss.³

As Dorian (1999:31) notes, 'Because it is only one of an almost infinite variety of potential identity markers, [language] is easily replaced by others that are just as effective. In this respect the ancestral language is functionally expendable.' Other possible identity markers include nationality, ethnicity, culture, class, age, gender, job, religion, personality, political persuasion, and interests. Some of these factors are individual, while others express social or group membership. They are not mutually exclusive, and different identities may, at times, be more salient (Fishman 1989).

Much of the discourse on endangered languages seems rather deterministic. The strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis claims

³ Interestingly, in another discussion of language and ethnicity (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1982:170), Le Page acknowledges his Guernsey roots: 'Le Page might well claim any Guernseyman called Le Page as a probable cousin since his father was a Guernseyman called Le Page'. I wonder to what extent this influenced his interest in French Creoles? One of my informants, brought up in Haiti, has commented on the similarity between Haitian Creole and Guernsey French; others have highlighted Norman settlement in the Caribbean (especially St Barthelemy).

that our way of thinking, and thus our cultural identity, is determined by the lexicon and syntax of our language (Mandelbaum 1949; Carroll 1956). This is the argument followed by many endangered language campaigners when they claim that when a language dies out, a unique way of looking at the world also disappears (Baker 2002; Nettle and Romaine 2000). Yet Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) stress that grammar, semantics and language variation must be seen in the light of social and political contexts: 'We do not intend to claim that ideology shapes language and that since language shapes social reality there is no way out. Our main goal in this book is to show how ideology enters into face-to-face speaking practices to create an international space in which the subconscious and automatic sociolinguistic processes of interpretation and interference can generate a variety of outcomes and make interpretations subject to question' (op. cit.:3). The notion of cultural and linguistic determinism is thus seen to be untenable, but it remains attractive to many writers.

For example, according to Hallowell (1969:81), the concepts of identity and culture are interdependent: the one cannot exist without the other. This is in the essentialist tradition criticized by Moya and Hames-Garcia. Likewise, Fishman (1999:444) claims: 'Languages do not just symbolize their associated cultures ... and they are not just indexically better suited to their related cultures than are any other languages ... what is most unique and basic about the link between language and culture is that in huge areas of real life the language is the culture and that neither law nor education nor religion nor government nor politics nor social organization would be possible without it.' However, this claim does not stand up to a comparison with reality: in Guernsey, for example, most of these institutions have rarely, if ever, been run through the indigenous language, yet Guernsey people of all backgrounds staunchly defend their unique governmental and legal system. Fishman (1991) also claims that one 'cannot be Xish through language Y'. However, in a survey of Jersey Norman French speakers, Skeet (2000) asked this very question and found that although most retained a strong affective attachment to and identification with Jersey Norman French, they saw in their daily lives numerous people who were adequately identified both by themselves and by others as fully Jersey without speaking the indigenous language, so were forced to conclude that speaking Jersey Norman French was not an essential indicator of 'Jerseyiness'.

The development of efficient communications has brought more cultures into contact (see 1.1). The extent to which this entails cultural and linguistic change or shift depends on how confident speakers are in their local language and culture, which in turn is a reflection of their status in

the society (see 3.3). In Guernsey the effects of immigration and mass media (very little of which are in the local language) have been accentuated by the recent economic dominance of the finance and tourism industries. As discussed above, feelings of distinctive identity are multifaceted and can outlive objective measures such as language and culture, so that a Guernsey person can still feel pride at being from Guernsey, although linguistically and culturally they may well be indistinguishable from an English person.

Another major strand in the literature on language and ethnic identity is the view of language as an inter-group phenomenon (Giles 1977; Tajfel 1978 and 1981; Giles and Johnstone 1981; Hogg and Abrams 1988, *inter alia*). However, in the Guernsey context it is not clear where ethnic or group boundaries can be drawn. Speakers and non-speakers are physically indistinguishable, and even native-speaking campaigners for Guernsey French admit to having problems telling from the accent in English who is a speaker of Guernsey French.

There is a tendency among ‘lay’ non-linguists to assume a link between language and identity – not necessarily a benevolent one – so that linguistic diversity is assumed to contribute to inter-ethnic conflict (Brewer 2001). In response, it can be pointed out that some of the worst violence occurs where language is not a factor at the start of the conflict, e.g. Rwanda or former Yugoslavia. In the latter case linguistic divergence was a consequence rather than a cause of conflict (Greenberg, forthcoming). Some studies see recognition of ethnic identity factors as necessary for conflict resolution (Daftary 2000; Ashmore et al. 2001; Kelman 2001). It is also necessary to recognise that language and ethnicity are by no means the only, or necessarily the overriding, factors in determining identity feelings. Mackie comments: ‘spurious arguments suggest that it is “natural” to feel closest to people of one’s own “culture”, ignoring all the differences of class, gender, and personality that operate against any notion of cultural homogeneity’ (Barker 1981, cited in Mackie 1996:40).

We must not be tempted by neat theories such as linguistic or cultural determinism to forget real life. As Craib (1998:176) points out, ‘Neither the self or identity are simple social products, rather in the end they are areas of individual and collective freedom which are constantly threatened by the structures and ideologies of the wider society.’ Although we are influenced by social attitudes and language ideologies, these can be changed, as shown in examples 18-19. Mackie promotes a ‘reflexive’ view of self, in which ‘people are still part of that cultural patterning, but they *see* their position within that patterning and how they are shaped according to it. Then they may be able to exercise choice between those aspects they

wish to adopt and those they wish to overcome, jettison, or change in themselves' (ibid.:42). As humans we thus have the individuality to accept or reject roles and cultures, and to add new dimensions to our ways of thinking by cross-cultural communication and language learning. This can be a way of asserting our individual identities in the face of social pressure to conform. Some of the language shift in Guernsey is as a result of individuals rejecting the old culture, which they perceive as rigid or repressive. It is also possible to reject a culture while retaining a strong affection for the language associated with it; some of my informants have done this (see 3.2). Mohanty claims that even collective identity can be consciously forged through re-examination of accepted cultural meanings and values, and given definitions of personal and political interests (Mohanty 2000:56). In the context of language shift such re-examination could, conceivably, challenge accepted concepts such as 'majority language = progress', as has happened in Wales; although in Guernsey collective identity seems to have been re-forged to omit Guernsey French. This may not have been entirely voluntary. As noted in 3.3, people are often faced with a lack of freedom in language choice and identity formation, resulting from economic necessity and internalised ideologies of language inferiority, which can lead to linguistic and cultural shift.

To what extent do feelings of ethnic group distinctiveness affect language loyalty and shift in Guernsey? In the 2001 census, 36% of the population reported being born outside the island. Of the remaining 64%, a considerable proportion must have immigrant backgrounds: there has been a continuous and substantial influx of outsiders since the mid-18th century.⁴ It can be generalised that descendants of immigrants are less likely to speak Guernsey French. However, I have several examples of more recent immigrants to Guernsey and Jersey, and also Ireland, attending, and even running, classes in the indigenous language, and also becoming leaders of the revitalisation movement.

Although Guernsey French speakers distinguish between people of native stock and those of English descent, there has been so much intermarriage that it would cause family rifts to identify English speakers as an 'outgroup'. A large proportion of my native-speaker informants have monolingual English-speaking spouses; only one claims to have no immigrants in her family. As another said:

⁴ I am grateful for this information to Rose-Marie Crossan.

- (1) Al est finie la laingue pasque ya aen amas qui saoïent mariaï
 ... coume mé – j'ai mariaï un angllais et i n'saï pas la laingue
 et i n'est intéressé (GF28)
 'The language is finished because there are a lot [of people]
 who got married ... like me – I married an Englishman and he
 doesn't know the language and he's not interested'

It is likely that such peaceable inter-group coexistence contributes to language shift; but would conflict be preferable? When asked whether he made efforts to find opportunities to speak Guernsey French, one informant commented:

- (2) I don't make much effort to find them really apart from
 meeting people you know that know it – I don't go to any
 societies that specifically speak in Guernsey French – I didn't
 join l'Assemblaïe d'Guernesiais [a language preservation
 society] because my wife doesn't know it and I feel that it
 would be a division you know? (GF9)

As noted above, it is also possible to reject a language while retaining a strong affection for the territory and culture associated with it. Many Guernsey people (and members of other groups undergoing similar shift) do not count language as a major part of their ethnic identity: possibly because of a lack of self-confidence in Guernsey identity, due to centuries of negative attitudes towards their language and culture; but perhaps also because, as described earlier, they and/or others they know have shifted language or culture, yet feel that their identity persists. It is therefore convenient to deny any link between language and identity. Referring to the distinction between old and new ethnicity described in 2.1, Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982:6) claim that 'the old ethnic ties found their linguistic expression in loyalty to a language other than that of the major society. The new ethnic identities rely on linguistic symbols to establish speech conventions that are significantly different. These symbols are much more than mere markers of identity. ... New communicative strategies are created based on the juxtaposition of two sets of forms which symbolize not only group membership but adherence to a set of values. These communicative conventions are largely independent of the actual language' (ibid:6). Thus, language loyalty is no longer seen as a necessary part of ethnic identity.

3. *Identity in Guernsey*

Jussim et al. note that ‘issues of self and identity occur at multiple levels of analysis: individual within a social context, groups within a society, and nations of the world’ (Jussim et al. 2001:1). Part 3 of this paper will consider the issue of identity among Guernsey-French speakers at all these levels.

3.1 *Local identity in relation to the wider world*

Many Guernsey people, especially older ones, are adamant that they are not English. Some even claim that England belongs to Guernsey because as part of Normandy, Guernsey won the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Guernsey identity is therefore not necessarily in conflict with Britishness. Many Guernsey people are staunchly in favour of the British royal family; the island’s loyalty is directly to the Crown, not to the British Parliament. The traditional toast is ‘La Royne, not’ Duc’ (‘The Queen, our Duke’), referring to the dukedom of Normandy. The royal family is not seen as a threat to the Guernsey French language, and on the occasion of a royal visit in 2000 a welcoming speech was read in Guernsey French.

English speakers tend to be equated with people of English origin by older Guernsey French speakers, no doubt because originally English was brought in by immigrants.

- (3) J’travaillais dauve mon père – et tous les vaïsaoïns ch’était tout en guernesiais ... mais aucht’haeure i saoiënt tous partis ain ? Aucht’haeure – ya iocque d’angllais ou pus angllais saoiïn doute – ou p’tête guernesiais saoiïn doute. (GF19b)
 ‘I worked with my father – and all the neighbours it was all in Guernsey French ... but now they’ve all gone eh? Now – there’s only English or more English no doubt – or perhaps Guernsey no doubt.’

Informants often express regret at Anglicisation, but very few express outright resentment, perhaps out of politeness (a highly regarded trait in Guernsey). The resentment in this example is directed more at rich incomers buying up country properties.

Some Guernsey people claim Norman French identity, on cultural rather than political grounds.

- (4) I get on well with Normandy French people – they’re on the same wavelength. You never know where you are with the English. (GF17)

Of course trading contacts have always been strong. There has also been considerable immigration from France in Guernsey’s history (see 1.1). However, in the 20th century contact with France lapsed, and for several years there was not even a ferry service. There is still no direct ferry from Guernsey to Normandy. For most purposes, Channel Islanders have turned their backs on France. Language, food, media, and religion are now almost wholly English.

As noted in 2.3, a link between language and national identity is often assumed in discourse on language and ethnicity, but just what the national identity is in Guernsey is not easy to ascertain. There is a strong sense of local pride, but the Channel Islands are not thought of as a nation or even as an entity. There are strong (if good-natured) rivalries between the islands,⁵ and even within Guernsey there is rivalry between parishes (see examples 6 and 20). For administrative purposes Guernsey is divided into ten parishes, each with its own character and, formerly, its own distinct dialect of Guernsey French (see the map in Figure 3). Nowadays they also have websites. In Figure 2, the Castel parish presents its view of its own identity to the world. The lack of reference to Britain could be interpreted in several ways: as a statement of separate identity, as an attempt to avoid offence by being neutral and not identifying with any external nation at all, or as a snub to Britain – but as noted above, there is little overt resentment of Britain, although most Guernsey people would probably bridle at being described as English.

⁵ On the radio I recently heard a weather saying recounted by a Jersey resident: ‘Red sky in the morning, sailor’s warning; red sky at night: Guernsey’s on fire.’ In both islands it is said that if you can see the other it is going to rain.



Fig. 2 The Castel Parish website
 [<http://www.castelparish.org.gg> – accessed 22.4.03]

This emphasis on regional identity influences the view of language. Many of my informants are keen to differentiate Guernsey French from Standard French, and point out differences, although Guernsey French is often referred to as *frënçais* (French). Guernsey French speakers are often at pains to point out that Guernsey French is not monolithic, and that regional differences are significant.

- (5) GF19a I'm from St Saviour's and I'd say *ieau* /jo/ but he'd say *iaou* /jœu/ [water] and that's Torteval. Terry as well would say *iaou* you see they were St Peter's Torteval – and
- GF19b no just St Peter's and Torteval
- GF19a not the Forest I don't think?
- GF19b Forest was again different
- GF19a and I say *là-haut* /la'ho/ but he says *là-haout* /la'hau/
- JS ah for up high

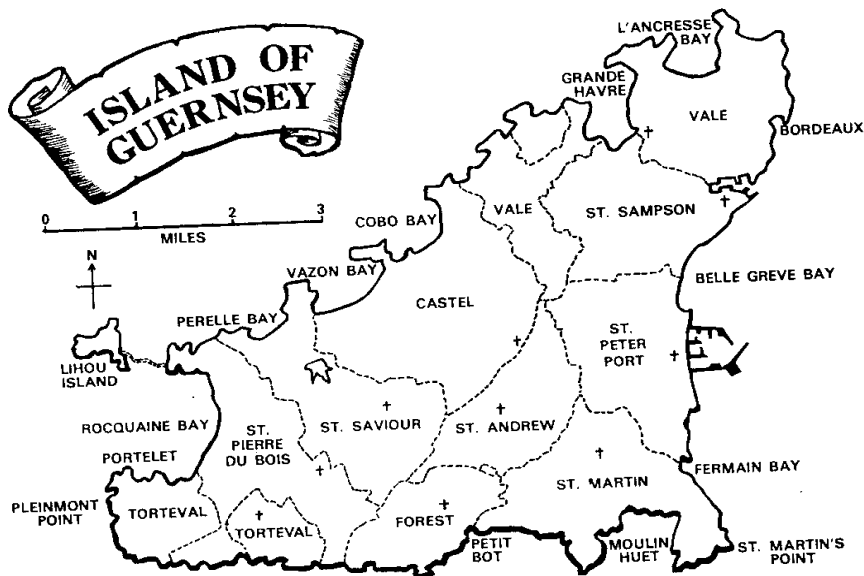


Fig. 3 Map of Guernsey showing parishes (from De Garis 1975)

- (6) That depends on where you come from [laugh] how you say it you see. Les Vâlais saôient aen p'tit pus sus les angiais – éiouque les sians des hautes paraises i saôient pus sus l'frënçais qui fait qué nou-z oime à dire qué nou-z est aen p'tit dans l'mide les câtelandes [laugh] (GF13)
 'The Vale people tend a bit towards the English – whereas those from the high parishes tend more towards French so we like to say that we're a bit in the middle the Castel people.'
 [see Figures 2 and 3]

The respondents to Pooley's (1998) survey in the Nord department of France expressed similar views, with more explanation:

- (7) Chaque village a son propre parler picard; en apprenant le patois d'un autre village, on ne retrouvera pas ses racines. (Pooley 1998:48)
 'Each village has its own variety of Picard; if you learn the dialect of another village, you won't find your roots.'

This concern is at the root of emphasis on local differences: if a 'unified Guernsey French' were taught in schools, as is happening with other European minority languages such as Breton or Basque, it would not be the variety which would connect learners to their roots.

In addition, some older speakers recognise that some of the younger activists who are campaigning for Guernsey French in schools are in fact

‘semi-speakers’ in Dorian’s (1977) terms, and they fear for the integrity of the language. They have quite a proprietary attitude towards Guernsey French, and would almost rather it died with them than survive in a garbled, or modernised, form.

- (8) No offence but I wouldn’t say that you’re good enough – that your Guernsey French is good enough to teach children – it’s like the Ravigotteurs you see they’re going to change the language to teach it – it won’t be the Guernsey French we know. (GF19b)

Such an attitude could be seen as counter-productive by language campaigners, but the last fluent generation is also the repository of oral traditions which have not yet been recorded and are fast dying out; and if the language is to be documented and preserved, is important that it be in as expressive a form as possible. There is also some debate about the ‘best accent’, as some view the accent of many younger speakers, and of those who were evacuated in the War, as unacceptably Anglicised.

Despite this strong sense of local distinctiveness, creeping Anglicisation continues. Although there are restrictions on house purchases by outsiders, English speakers continue to move in. In recent years rich Anglophones have tended to buy properties in country areas which were previously the preserve of ‘country bumpkins’ and bastions of Guernsey French (see example 3). Thus, a language community (and old-type ethnicity in Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz’ (1982) terms) is being eroded, and opportunities for isolated older people to speak Guernsey French decrease further.

- (9) Chutte maïsaon-là et mé nou-z est les Guernesiais – tous les aoutes saoiënt de l’Anglletaire ou des aoutes piaches – nou-z était à dire l’aoute jour cor, quënd nou pense a tous les Guernesiais qui demeuraiënt dans chutte rue ichin, et y’en a pas ioque la Ruth et Len et mé et les aoutes saoint angllais aucht’haeure (GF28)

‘That house there and me we’re the Guernsey people – all the others are from England or from other places – we were saying the other day cor, when we think of all the Guernsey people who lived in this road, and there’s only Ruth and Len and me and the others are English now.’

There is no higher education in the Channel Islands, and there is a general skills shortage. The finance industry, with its high salaries, is the first choice of career for many islanders, while young people leave for higher education and training, many never to return. A considerable proportion of teachers and civil servants have to be imported, mostly from the UK.⁶ There are, however, some native speakers of Guernsey French in the civil service, who use the language at work (unofficially of course). One told me how she had just finished a telephone conversation in Guernsey French when an English colleague came up to her and asked her what language she had been speaking. He had not even been aware that Guernsey had a language of its own. Thus, those who are responsible for policy decisions often have little knowledge of local culture. Imported teachers are ignorant of local history and culture, which are given little space in the curriculum. Virtually the only local history taught is the German occupation from 1940 to 1945 and the evacuation of children to England beforehand (see Sallabank 2002). Eleven-year-olds I talked to in September 2001 did not even know the date of the Norman conquest of England. One language campaigner suspects that the lack of teaching of local language and culture in schools is deliberate, to prevent separatist sentiments from growing, and to encourage Anglicisation and integration; but a more likely explanation is 'benign neglect' or apathy.

Guernsey is self-governing in internal matters such as education and finance, but since there is such a strong British influence in policy-making, it tends to follow a British (or, more specifically, English) model, although in education, for example, it could easily have followed a Welsh bilingual model (or any other, for that matter). Islanders are proud of the Norman legal tradition, but this aspect of Guernsey identity is also under threat. Interviewees note that property laws, one of the last extant areas of traditional Norman law, and which used to be replete with Norman terminology, are gradually being altered to follow an English model with English terminology.

At the other end of the social scale, there is also a shortage of workers willing to take on lower-paid jobs such as hotel, catering and care work. Hotel workers are recruited from Portugal (mainly Madeira) and Latvia, originally on a seasonal basis but there has been some intermarriage and permanent settlement; there may now even be as many speakers of Portuguese as Guernsey French on the island, but the 2001

⁶ These outsiders are nowadays only given five-year licences rather than full residence rights, which restrict their choice of homes to a certain rateable value and oblige them to sell after five years, although some settle and marry local people.

census, which asked about competence in Guernsey French, did not ask about other languages. As mentioned in 1.2, the majority of speakers of Guernsey French are elderly, and are increasingly housed in care homes. Nursing and care workers are recruited from the UK, Portugal, and the Philippines. I was told anecdotally about an old man in a home who was thought by the care staff to be mad because he was ‘rambling incoherently’. It was only when someone visited who knew Guernsey French that it was realised he was speaking coherently, in Guernsey French.

This case highlights the need for policies to cater for Guernsey French speakers, especially the elderly who may forget their second language due to strokes or stress. In Wales, ambulances carry a Welsh speaker for such an eventuality. The Guernsey government’s response would probably be to wait until all the Guernsey French speakers are dead, as it has been doing for the last 150 years. This is not an approach which respects linguistic human rights or dignity, which include respect for identity. Guernsey has signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights; one of my future areas of investigation will be to interview government officials to ascertain what implications this might have for language policies.

As most of my Guernsey French-speaking informants were from older generations, I also talked to three classes of schoolchildren, aged 11, 13, and 17. Although over half of the 11-year-olds had an English parent, nearly half had heard Guernsey French, and a third had relatives who spoke it. They professed not to understand it except ‘some bits’, but knew what their older relatives were saying when they swore in Guernsey French. (This reversion to the L1 *in extremis* may be a sign of affective attachment – see 3.2.) Some children said they would like to speak it with their grandparents. Most of the 11-year-olds thought it would be a good idea to learn Guernsey French in schools – although with 13- and 17-year-olds the proportion dropped to a small minority. Comments included:

(10) ‘it’s like – we live in Guernsey and – like – we should learn’

When asked about how they identified themselves, as many of the 11-year-olds said they felt English as Guernsey; one felt French and one Thai. The majority of all the school students wanted to leave Guernsey when they were older; this may just be due to general teenage disaffection and lack of local opportunities, but it also reflects feelings towards traditional language and culture. Nevertheless, the following comment was heard independently from several young people, and may offer a way to

‘sell’ traditional language and culture to them, as they place little value on it otherwise.

(11) ‘A secret language of our own – cool’.

As mentioned in 2.3, many Guernsey people do not see language as a major part of their ethnic identity, especially those who do not speak the indigenous vernacular. This is also the case for some speakers, especially ‘younger’ ones.⁷ However, some older speakers feel that they are the true representatives of Guernsey French identity:

(12) Ch’est nous les verres Guernesiais. (GF16)
 ‘We are the true Guernsey people.’

3.2 Language and the emotions

Much language use is not purely functional; language is not only for communication but also about establishing and maintaining relationships and expressing identity, i.e. the phatic function (Jakobson 1960).

I have found evidence for profound affective attachment for the indigenous language:

(13) Guernsey French is wonderful ... people’s eyes dance when they speak it (GF17)

(14) plloin /pjõĩ/ – it’s a nice word (GF28)

(15) If I was kidnapped like Terry Waite or on a desert island, although I’m a Christian and I should say I’d like the Bible, what would mean the most to me would be a recording of someone speaking Guernsey French (GF33).

Several informants have told me that when relatives were dying, they reverted to their first language. For many older Guernsey French speakers the language is connected with memories of loved ones who have now passed away – perhaps bittersweet memories make for ambivalent attitudes.

⁷ The youngest native speakers are in their late 30s, apart from a couple of under-20s reported in the census which are seen as suspect by language campaigners.

- (16) With my brothers when we were having a fun evening we used to tell each other a lot of stories – which were really funny and I always meant for us to record it – when we were having one of those sessions – but it never actually happened – and it’s lost now. (GF13)

This informant also noted that self-expression is easier in the first language:

- (17) Aen caoup dans l’s États je dis que si ch’était en guernesiais je pourrais mé – m’expressai bian mus [laugh] – i riyaiant (GF13)
 ‘Once in the States⁸ I said that if it were in Guernsey French I would be able to express myself much better – they laughed.’

Some of my informants have ‘come back to their roots’ after a number of years when they rejected traditional language and culture. They may be criticized by others because they did not speak Guernsey French when they were younger, but at least some are now trying to make up for lost time in their enthusiasm for the language. Unfortunately however, this ‘conversion’ often takes place too late to raise children speaking the ancestral language. The time of life when people are able to transmit a language to their children is also the period when they may be rejecting the old culture, or busy perfecting their proficiency in the dominant language for economic or educational reasons.

For non-speakers, discussion of language issues, far from arousing pleasant emotions or nostalgia, can invoke anger and resentment. This might perhaps reflect the historical negative attitudes among non-speaking immigrants (see 1.1), but another possible explanation is guilt and resentment at having had to switch language for economic reasons.

⁸ This informant was a member of the island parliament (the States of Deliberation) at the time. It is only since 1948 that government business has been conducted entirely in English, although English has been allowed since 1898. Before then the official language was Standard French, although an American philologist who sat in on some debates (Lewis 1895) commented that the French used was in fact often not very standard. Unlike in the modern devolved Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish assemblies, the indigenous vernacular is not used in parliamentary debates, and there is no provision for translation.

3.3 Identity, attitudes and language loyalty

As stated above, many older speakers express an emotional attachment for Guernsey French. But it must also be remembered that it is their generation who caused its demise by not transmitting it to their children. Emotional attachment does not necessarily inspire speakers to act to save their language from dying out. Bankston and Henry (1998) agree that a strong identification with a minority language may not always correlate positively with language maintenance, in particular when it comes to transmitting a low-status variety to children.

Negative attitudes towards minority languages are well documented. It is not uncommon for such attitudes to be internalised by the speakers themselves: Labov (1966:489) claimed that 'the term "linguistic self-hatred" may not be too extreme'. Classification of one's own language as a 'non-language' or as 'deformed French' (as opposed to 'good French', as Guernsey French and Standard French are still sometimes known respectively), is indicative of a lack of confidence in traditional identity, and leads to acquiescence in language shift.

It may therefore be a mistake for language campaigners to stress the link between language and traditional culture too strongly. For many islanders, especially those whose families shifted to English, the old language and culture are associated with poverty and backwardness. For example, Guernsey French has no word for 'bathroom', because its development stopped with the Second World War and many pre-war Guernsey houses had no bathroom. In this respect, Denison's (1977) charge of 'language suicide' and Ladefoged's (1992) assertion that many minority language speakers consciously trade their traditional language for economic gain, are quite likely to have more than a grain of truth in the Guernsey context.

But, as noted in 2.4, it would be ingenuous to claim that those 'choosing' language shift have free choice. Walker (1993) uses the analogy of Maslow's (1954) Hierarchy of Needs, according to which basic needs such as food and security have to be satisfied before 'higher' concerns such as esteem and self-actualisation. Thus, people whose main concern is food and shelter are motivated to learn a language which they perceive as more likely to fulfill those needs – indeed, in many cases the dominant language is the only route to education and jobs. Once their descendants are economically secure, they have the leisure to regret what they have lost. This 'attitude shift' is increasingly found among younger generations in minority groups (Dorian 1993; Crystal 2000:106). But, as

Crystal points out, ‘by then, without any preservation measures, it is too late.’ (ibid.)

The Guernsey French speakers I have interviewed are largely from former farming families. In the past, Guernsey French was seen as a low-status peasant dialect. Several speakers report being called ‘country bumpkins’: a common insult is ‘oh you come from the country you’. However, this has changed in recent years, as ‘identity’ and language revitalisation come to be seen as middle-class concerns: as one interviewee said, ‘the only people who want to save the language are intellectuals’. This tallies with Walker’s analysis in some respects. Educated people are also less likely to see Guernsey French as ‘deformed French’.

3.4 Linguistic pride regained?

As mentioned earlier, negative attitudes are a major factor in loss of confidence in local identity and in promoting language shift, but a sense of pride is gradually regaining ground, with the language being reclaimed as a positive identity marker.

- (18) I think that was the thing – that’s how we started to lose it after the war er it wasn’t the in thing – to speak Guernsey French and that is right that in certain company you didn’t speak it – because it made you feel a bit inferior but now it’s the other way round – you don’t feel at all inferior if you know it, it’s completely the opposite you know? (GF13)
- (19) I was put down at school for being from the country and didn’t admit to speaking Guernsey French. ... J’oïmerais bian que tout ma fomille [pâle] pasque quënd j’étais p’tite j’étais embarrassai dé lé pâlaï mais ... aucht’haeure je sis aen amas fière que je peux le pâlaï. (GF28)
 ‘... I’d like all my family [to speak] because when I was little I was embarrassed to speak it but ... now I’m very proud/happy that I can speak it’
- (20) Nou joue à bowls et nou se d’vise, nou veit des gens là qu’nou se counnit en guernesiais – et l’onnaïe passaï y’a aen haoume qui dit – huh, that foreign language! You come from the country – et je li dis yes, and all our rubbish goes down the Vale! (GF11)

‘We play bowls and we speak to each other, we see people there we know in Guernsey French – and last year there was a man who said huh, that foreign language! You come from the country – and I told him yes, and all our rubbish goes down the Vale!’⁹

There has also been a shift in how Guernsey identity is presented to outside world. In the 1960s and 70s, the message to the banking industry and tourists (and even printed on postcards) was that there was ‘no language problem’. Now the tourist board website stresses ‘heritage’.

4. Identity or vitality?

There is a worrying trend for campaigners to focus their attention on language as a symbol of identity, rather than on the social and economic factors which caused language shift, or on revitalisation of the living language through intergenerational transmission. Fishman (1987), cited in Crystal (2000:83), calls this trend the ‘folklorisation’ of language: the use of an indigenous language only in irrelevant or unimportant domains. Cultural festivals are a relatively uncontroversial language activity, and the only type which attracts official funding in Guernsey (from the Tourist Board rather than the Heritage Committee, which concerns itself only with buildings and monuments). Although cultural festivals are an important expression of linguistic pride and identity, and provide an opportunity for the audience to meet fellow speakers and speak the language during the event, the focus is on linguistic identity as display rather than on language as a living part of everyday life. As more non-speakers enter who have learnt set pieces without much other knowledge of the language, judges ‘help’ them by commenting in English, so the Guernsey French environment is further diluted. A similar process has happened in an association originally set up to preserve the language through speaking it at social events: as more non-speaking members have joined, albeit with good intentions to support the language, the medium of meetings has switched to English. So the opportunities to speak the language dwindle and even people who win prizes for their Guernsey French in cultural festivals cannot always hold a conversation in it.

⁹ The granite quarries which drew immigrant labourers in the 19th century, especially to northern Guernsey, are now used as rubbish tips.

Around the world, language revitalisation movements are still at early stages in their development. Many ideas have been tried, some of which seem more successful than others. There are some common strands which can be identified, for example the tendency to abdicate responsibility noted, for example, by King (2001) and Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998). Language communities and campaigners find it easier to focus on getting the language introduced into the school curriculum than on changing their own and their neighbours' behaviour, although intergenerational transmission in the home is the only real gauge of a language's vitality (Fishman 1991). It may be that campaigns all have to go through this stage in order to gain acceptance and maturity. Getting the minority language accepted into the school curriculum is also an important part of status planning and thus in countering negative attitudes. It also entails standardisation and modernisation of terminology (corpus planning).

In some places language revitalisation has progressed considerably further than in Guernsey, and further stages of awareness have been reached. This is particularly the case where official support has been attained, as in Wales or New Zealand. I have recently heard about a scheme to teach prospective parents their minority language some years before they have a child, focusing on childcare and child-raising language.¹⁰ But this was only after the community had realised for itself that school-based language teaching, even full immersion, was not delivering long-term revitalisation: children had not accepted it as part of their identity, were not using it after they left school, and did not know vital domestic expressions.

The main reason given by language campaigners for not using Guernsey French in their own homes is lack of confidence. It can sometimes be difficult to tell the difference between lack of confidence in language proficiency, and lack of confidence in the validity and usefulness of a low-status variety. This may help to explain the discrepancy in figures between those who reported themselves as fluent in Guernsey French in the census (2%) and those who claim to be able to understand some (14%). 'Understanders' (or 'latent speakers', in the terms of Basham and Fathman 2003) clearly have a good knowledge of structure and lexis, but lack the confidence to speak. I have witnessed conversations where one interlocutor speaks in Guernsey French and the other in English; this was apparently common between parents and children a generation ago.

¹⁰ I have been requested not to divulge details for a couple of years, until the scheme has had a chance to prove itself.

One possible way to improve both kinds of confidence might be the Master-Apprentice programme developed by Native American language campaigners in California (Hinton 1997), where older fluent speakers are paired with learners or latent speakers. This would also serve a useful social purpose in providing interlocutors for isolated older speakers or those in care homes.

To go through all the 'developmental stages' in revitalisation takes time that some languages do not have. I am trying to start a documentation project in case the same thing happens in Guernsey as in the Isle of Man or Cornwall, where a groundswell of opinion in favour of language revitalisation has only built up after all the native speakers have gone.

Language revitalisation in Guernsey still has a long way to go before it can claim the success of Welsh or Maori, and it is likely that the current older generation will be the last fluent native speakers. At least people are coming to recognise what is being lost, but as mentioned earlier, strong identification with a language, and strong emotional bonds to it, do not guarantee its preservation. But it is hard to see how a minority language can be preserved without these: as it is difficult to rationalise on functional grounds alone, a major justification for minority language revitalisation must be to maintain links with a community's roots and identity.

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