Writing in an unwritten language:
the case of Guernsey French

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Abstract. The Norman vernacular of the Channel Islands has scarcely been developed or modernised in the last fifty years. Many people in Guernsey are of the opinion that it is not a written language, but there is in fact a fairly large body of literature. Until the late 19th century the local vernacular (Guernesiais) was the majority language in Guernsey, with French as the High diglossic partner. The spread of English, with its economic power and monopoly of the mass media, has displaced French and led to Guernesiais being threatened with extinction. This article discusses speakers' literacy practices, attitudes towards the writing of Guernesiais and various attempts at orthographic systems, leading to a wider discussion of the place of writing and literacy in the survival of endangered languages.

1. Introduction

1.1 Geographical and historical background

Guernsey is the second largest of the Channel Islands, in the Gulf of St Malo off Northern France. The Channel Islands are famous for their cows, dairy products, sweaters, tomatoes and potatoes, and are popular in Europe as a tourist destination. Many visitors remain unaware that they also have their own language, which is now highly endangered.

The Channel Islands belong to the British Crown but not to the United Kingdom, and are not full members of the European Union. They are self-governing with regard to internal affairs, with their own parliaments. Guernsey has a population of just under 60,000 (2001 census) and a land area of 62 km^2. It is about 80 miles/130 km from Weymouth, the nearest British port, but only 30 km from Dielette, the nearest French port (see the map in Figure 1). This geographical proximity to France, but political allegiance to Britain, lies at the heart of the sociolinguistic situation.

The Channel Islands were formally annexed by Normandy in 933, and their relationship with England started in 1066, when Duke William of Normandy conquered England. King John lost mainland Normandy to

Philip Augustus of France in 1204, but the Channel Islands remained loyal to the English Crown, for which they were rewarded with autonomy and tax privileges which became very important to their economies, as they eventually developed into offshore banking centres and tax havens. The islands were strategically important and fought off numerous attacks from France until the 19th century.
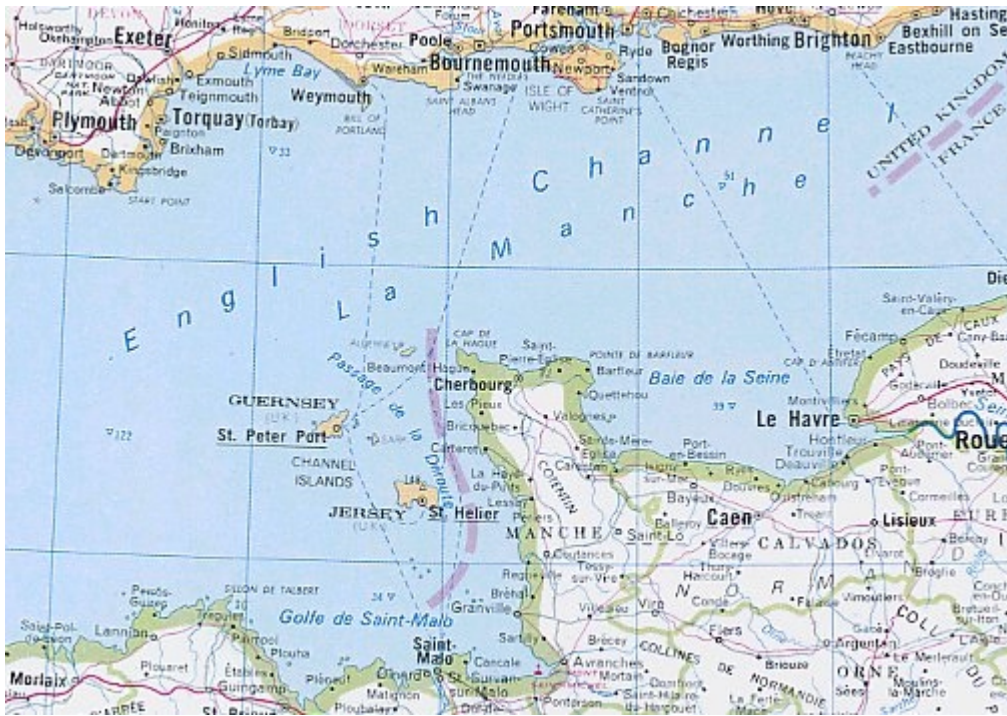

Fig. 1 Geographical location of Guernsey relative to France and the UK

1.2 Sociolinguistic background

The indigenous language of the Channel Islands is Norman French, of which different varieties are spoken in each island as well as in mainland Normandy. Norman is a branch of the *Langues d'oïl* of northern France, and was written down long before the Parisian dialect. Claims that it is merely debased French, or a *patois* (e.g. Brasseur 1998), are incorrect, as Norman and Parisian French are separate branches of the same language family, rather than one being derived from the other. When François I succeeded to the throne of France in 1515, he promoted and standardised the Parisian dialect, which became the prestige variety, although regional languages were still tolerated: the monarchy did not mind which languages the people spoke, as long as they paid their taxes. After the French Revolution in 1789 this policy was seen as 'divide and rule'. The

Revolutionaries felt that it was the right and duty of all French citizens to have access to the 'language of civilisation' or Standard French, the only language in which they believed higher thought processes were possible (Grillo 1989:189ff). Local varieties were actively suppressed, and even languages with separate roots, such as Breton, are still often looked down upon as *patois* or peasant dialects. Guernsey was not part of France politically, but was strongly influenced by French attitudes. Standard French was adopted as the High variety in Guernsey; the reasons are unclear, and need more research, but it would seem that it was largely due to cultural dominance, geographical closeness and trade links.

The same monolingual language ideology was dominant in Britain, where minority languages such as Welsh and Gaelic were also actively suppressed. In both countries children were punished for speaking minority languages in schools (Adler 1977; Paulston 1987:46; Grillo 1989). However, in the late 20th century there was a revival of interest and pride in regional culture, and attitudes towards minority and ancestral languages became more positive. Pressure from the European Union, which adopted the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages in 1992 (Tabouret-Keller 1999) and set up the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages, led to official recognition for many regional languages, including Norman, which was recognised in France as a 'language of regional identity' in 1994. However, as Guernsey is not a full member of the European Union, it does not have to implement European policy directives. In Guernsey the indigenous vernacular still has no official status, although the UK now actively promotes indigenous minority languages, with schooling in Welsh and Gaelic. Guernsey's language does not even have any official name, and is often simply called 'the *patois*'. It is commonly known as 'Guernsey French', but the majority of native speakers I have interviewed prefer to call it *Guernesiais*, so that is the term used in this paper.

Until the early 20th century, Guernesiais was spoken by the majority of the population for all day-to-day purposes, in a diglossic relationship with Standard French as the 'High' partner. But since the early 19th century, English has been gradually moving into first High and then Low functions. As Guernesiais is not officially recognised, there are currently no reliable statistics on the number of speakers. Estimates by local people range from 5,000 down to 1,000 (i.e. from 8.33% to 1.67% of the population). Guernesiais is at approximately level 7 on Fishman's (1991) scale of language endangerment, as most of the speakers are over child-bearing age. Following pressure from language enthusiasts, the April 2001

census was the first to include a question on the number and proficiency of Guernesiais speakers, but by the end of June only a basic population count was available.

2. The (non)creation of a language

Guernesiais has never been used or taught in education. When compulsory elementary education was introduced in 1900, English was chosen as the medium. Before that, most education was in Standard French. Up to the 1950s it was fairly common for children to speak only Guernesiais until they went to school. However, it is thought that there are now virtually no children learning Guernesiais, and the youngest person I have found who could not speak English before starting school is now 36. The effect of the medium of education on language attitudes and practice cannot be underestimated. It reinforced the belief that Guernesiais was merely a peasant dialect, fit only for illiterates. In addition, many of my older informants have reported that children who could not speak English had unhappy experiences at school, so parents started speaking English in the home to prepare and protect their children. The children too were anxious to learn English to avoid censure and ridicule. Lois Ainger comments on her own experience:

> My first days at school were overshadowed by a great handicap. I couldn't speak the language. … When I tried out a few words, I suffered acutely from the taunts of an aggressive boy, who ridiculed my small mistakes. (Ainger 1995:10–12)

In the context of the dominant monolingual language ideology of the time, additive bilingualism was not even considered as an option. Within two generations, Guernesiais was no longer used as the language of the home in the majority of island families.

2.1 The fall in status of Norman

In the Middle Ages Norman was an important international language in France, England, Italy, and even in the Middle East during the Crusades (Guillemin 1985). It had a large body of literature, the most well-known of which are *Le Chanson de Roland,* and *Le Roman de Rou* and *Le Roman de Brut* by Wace, who proudly proclaimed that he came from the

neighbouring island of Jersey. Over twenty other works are listed by Menger (1904) and Ellis and mac a'Ghobainn (1971). Chaurand (1999:36–8) cites Bédier (1968:250), editor of the *Chanson de Roland*, that we do not possess a single document from the 12th century which was written in the Parisian region.

In England, Anglo-Norman (the name used to denote the dialect of Norman which developed in England after the Norman Conquest in 1066) was the language of the élite from the 11th to the 14th centuries, and was still used for legal purposes until the 16th century. Ellis and mac a'Ghobainn (1971:39) claimed that if printing had been introduced a hundred years earlier, Norman French might have remained the 'High' language in England. It had a profound influence on the English language (Bailey and Maroldt 1977:21ff; Grillo 1989:46) – including its spelling (Scragg 1974:40ff.). It is thought by Guernsey enthusiasts that Norman is now more widely spoken in the Channel Islands than in mainland Normandy, and that it has maintained its purity and some archaic features most strongly in Guernsey. Guernesiais speakers also claim that Guernesiais has been less influenced by French than its counterpart in Jersey, which is closer to France and has received more French-speaking immigrants. Although Standard French was the official language of Guernsey and was in theory used in schools, churches (after the Reformation), and in the parliament and law courts, an American philologist who visited the island in the late 19th century (Lewis 1895) noted that the French actually spoken in the island parliament was far from standard.

Up to the late 19th century (including during the high period of Norman culture), the majority of the inhabitants of the Channel Islands were illiterate, like the majority of people everywhere. This produced a self-fulfilling syllogism: because its speakers were illiterate, Guernesiais must be a dialect of illiterate peasants and not worthy of being written. Centuries of cohabitation with 'good French', as Standard French is still sometimes called, led to a certain amount of influence on the structure and vocabulary, and to the widespread opinion that Guernesiais was merely a dialect of French, as its roots were forgotten. Nevertheless, Guernesiais retained its distinct vocabulary and structure: Lukis (1976) compared the differences between Guernesiais and French to those between Spanish and Portuguese, and notes that is remarkable that Guernesiais has retained so many of its distinguishing features.

Guernesiais was not thought worthy of being written until the Romantic revival of interest in local vernaculars and folklore in the 19th

century. At that time numerous other vernaculars, which had been equally low in status, were standardised, and are now accepted as fully-fledged languages for all purposes; Ellis and mac a'Ghobainn (1971) give about 20 examples, mainly from Europe. Some of these, for example, Polish, are clearly differentiated from neighbouring languages; in the terms of Kloss (1967), they are *Abstandsprachen* ('languages by distance'). Others, such as Norwegian, have established their identity by emphasising features which distinguish them from related languages; these are termed *Ausbausprachen* ('languages by elaboration').

French, as the more powerful partner in the diglossic relationship in Guernsey, was the *Dachsprache* in Kloss's terms, literally 'roof language', sometimes called 'overarching language' (Muljačič 1989). According to Kloss (1952), it should in theory be easier for a language variety to develop into an *Ausbausprache* if its speakers are politically independent of the overarching variety. As Guernsey is politically separate from France, this should, again in theory, allow Guernesiais to develop into a language in its own right. But it has not done so.

In the 19th-century revival, Guernesiais was the first variety of Norman to be written. But this was not the start of a great renaissance of Norman culture. The two main Guernesiais authors of that time, George Métivier (1831, 1866, 1883) and Denys Corbet (1871, 1874 etc., 1884), could see that Guernesiais was already threatened by English. Instead of starting a campaign for vernacular literacy, they concentrated on trying to preserve the spirit of Guernesiais through the medium they saw as the most civilised (and civilising): poetry. Corbet even called his main collection of poems *Le Chant du draïn rimeux*, 'The song of the last poet' (1884); he thought he would be the last person to write in Guernesiais. But instead, his example inspired numerous others, e.g. Lenfestey (1875), T. H. Mahy, Nico Guilbert, R. H Tourtel, and several other works which are no longer extant except in collections such as Pitts (1883) and Henly (1949). Lewis (1895) listed 16 published works in Guernesiais, mainly folklore and poetry.

Some minority languages, such as Welsh or Gaelic, had their status as literary languages enhanced by the translation of the Bible, and numerous other languages have first been written down by missionaries. However, the Bible has never been translated into Guernesiais; after the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, a French Bible and Prayer Book were used once the Anglican church realised that nobody understood the English ones. The only part of the Bible which has been translated into Guernesiais is St Matthew's Gospel, translated by Métivier

for the French Prince Louis Napoleon, who collected versions of this gospel in different languages; the written Guernesiais used in this version is scarcely distinguishable from French. Nevertheless, the continued use of French in churches contributed to the maintenance of Guernesiais into the 20th century.[1]

2.2 *The role of identity*

In both *Abstand* and *Ausbau*, claims of linguistic varieties to be established as full languages in their own right are often furthered by the use of the language as a symbol of identity in struggles for political independence. Adler (1977: 99) and Fishman (1991) see political autonomy or self-determination as one of the keys to safeguarding a language's vitality. However, in Guernsey this has not been the case. The island has been politically autonomous since 1204, but the indigenous language is now highly endangered. It could even be possible that the language has suffered from the lack of need for a symbol of national identity.

The equating of language and identity assumed in much of the discourse of language rights (e.g. in Ellis and mac a'Ghobainn (1971); Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985); Fishman (1991); Skutnabb-Kangas (1999)) does not seem to apply to the Guernsey situation. Although most of my older informants have a strong sense of Guernsey identity, this does not seem to be in opposition to a British identity. Only one of my 40 interviewees expressed open resentment at increasing Anglicisation, although several expressed regret.

Giles and Johnstone (1987:69) note that language choice is an individual as well as a macro-group phenomenon, but that ethnolinguistic identity is part of inter-group relationships. Historically, for the last 800 years Guernsey has been allied with England, as a strategically important bastion against France. This political alignment may well have affected islanders' feelings of identity. The extent to which islanders in general, and Guernesiais speakers in particular, feel themselves to be a separate ethnic/ ethnolinguistic group will be researched in much greater detail in the next year or so. Preliminary indications are that older islanders are

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[1] In the first few interviews I conducted, one of the questions I asked interviewees was which language they talked to God in, following the example of Susan Gal (1979), on the assumption that this would be the language they felt most emotionally close to. However, the reaction of interviewees to this question was quite negative, and I soon learnt that Guernesiais was not considered of high enough status for talking to God.

proud of their separate identity from the UK, but there is strong loyalty to the British crown. Children aged 11-18 in three schools visited in September 2001 and March 2002 displayed much less pride in a Guernsey identity. Some language revivalists suspect that the lack of teaching of Guernsey history and culture in schools is intended to prevent a nationalist movement and to increase identification with the UK.

It is impossible to tell who is a speaker of Guernesiais by sight, or from their accent when speaking English; even native speakers of Guernesiais report making mistakes in this regard. In a situation where the majority of native-born Guernsey people do not speak Guernesiais, it is difficult to see language use as an inter-group phenomenon. There have always been a large number of intermarriages between Guernsey people and British immigrants, which makes any ethnic distinction hazardous, to say the least. This puts Guernesiais in quite a weak position when arguments for revitalisation are sought, and its ethnolinguistic vitality on scales such as those of Giles and Johnson (1981) is low. A new paradigm is therefore needed. Giles and Johnson (1987:71) acknowledge that ethnic group membership is not the only salient category in people's lives and may not be of explanatory value in all social interactions.

To counter the disconnection of language from cultural identity, some attempts are being made to re-establish a link between language and local identity as an inter-group marker: e.g. in an interview in the *Guernsey Press* (7.5.2001), the then President of the largest Guernsey cultural society, La Société Guernesiaise, stated: 'It's very important to keep the tradition – we are losing our identity and some people think we are part of England.'

But for many islanders, especially those whose families shifted to English, the old language and culture are associated with poverty and backwardness, so it may be counter-productive for language activists to stress this aspect too strongly. 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 it would be a mistake to claim that those 'choosing' language shift had free choice. An indicator of this is the amount of animosity, perhaps related to guilt, that discussions of this nature can arouse in people whose families abandoned Guernesiais. Another is the extent to which the Second World War is cited as a critical factor in the decline of Guernesiais. In 1940 half of the population, including practically all the children, was evacuated to Britain just before the

German invasion. When the children returned 5 years later, very few spoke Guernesiais. This was of course a significant and traumatic experience, and not only language competence but also attitudes were a casualty of war. However, the evacuation merely hastened a process which was already well under way, and the common blaming of the war may be an attempt to avoid accepting responsibility for language shift and loss of culture.

In my pilot study in September 2001, forty speakers of Guernesiais were interviewed about their language practices. Most of the interviews were 'semi-structured', based on a questionnaire but with opportunities for extra comments. In addition, the questionnaire was sent out in October 2001 to Guernsey-resident members of La Société Guernesiaise. 90 replies were received, just under half of which were from Guernesiais speakers; this is thus already the largest language survey ever undertaken in Guernsey.

When questioned about the values they attach to Guernesiais, many native speakers stressed its affective value and the untranslatability of jokes in it: 'I can't help smiling when I speak it'; 'Guernesiais has happy associations'. Guernesiais fulfils a phatic, affective role, which is also confirmed by the situations in which informants say they use it most: at home, with friends, socially at church or at social clubs/events. In contrast, English is used for 'communicative' speech events where the focus is the transfer of information. There appears to be a fear among some native speakers that modernisation of Guernesiais to make it more 'efficient' might reduce it to a mere utilitarian instrument like English, and undermine its affective role.

2.3 Linguistic modernisation

Guernesiais has hardly developed any new terminology in the last 50 years. In the early 20th century, before the Second World War, English words for newly-introduced items were adapted and given Guernesiais morphology and pronunciation: hence *le moto* (car), or *le baïce* (bicycle). These developed without reference to parallel terminology in Standard French, which uses *la voiture* or *l'auto* for 'car' (*la moto* is 'motorbike'), and *la bicyclette* or *le vélo* for 'bicycle': this illustrates the lack of contact and identification between Guernsey and France in the 20th century.[2] Since 1945, English words have tended to be borrowed without modification.

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[2] At times there have not even been ferry services between the two.

For example, there are no words for 'refrigerator' or 'bathroom' in Guernesiais, as few Guernsey homes had these before the second world war; the English terms are used. This raises the question of where new terminology should be taken from, and how (if at all) it should be adapted, if Guernesiais is to be modernised. By not adapting English words, speakers may be indicating that English remains foreign, and their desire to keep its influence on the structure of Guernesiais to a minimum. However, younger language activists such as the group 'les Ravigotteurs' ('the revitalisers') recognise the need to raise the status of Guernesiais by teaching it in schools, for which standardisation and modernisation are required.

When asked where Guernesiais should take new terminology from, speakers responding to the postal questionnaire were almost equally divided between those who favoured French and those in favour of English as a source of new terms (38% vs. 34%), while non-speakers were strongly in favour of English (48% vs. 26%). Among the face-to-face interviewees (who tended to be more fluent in and committed to Guernesiais), 50% favoured French, 30% English, 10% both and 10% neither. However, in practice, speakers continue to use English terms. (On a practical level, to substitute French terms would often result in incomprehension.)[3] Several respondents recognised that English, as an international language of science and technology, is already the source of much Guernesiais terminology and will probably continue to be. Some language activists also justify borrowing terminology from English on the grounds that it is not really borrowing, but rather the return of a long-term loan, since so much English vocabulary originally came from Norman: 28.3% of the *Oxford English Dictionary* according to Bailey and Maroldt (1977:31), compared to 27% of Anglo-Saxon provenance; Scragg (1974:40) estimates 40%. Guernesiais contains many Old French words which are cognate with their English equivalents, but which are now obsolete in French: e.g. *coppe* (cup), *courtaines* (curtains), *cotte* (coat); some activists even claim that *shop* was originally a Norman term.

Returning to the framework of Heinz Kloss mentioned in 2.1, instead of taking advantage of being a 'roofless dialect' to develop as an

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[3] Attrition processes in individuals also contribute to the impoverishment of Guernesiais. Many speakers are isolated from other speakers and speak it only once or twice a year; when an opportunity to interact with another Guernesiais speaker arises, they often find it difficult to remember some terms, while English ones are always handily available to replace them, not only psycholinguistically but also sociolinguistically.

Ausbausprache or language in its own right, Guernesiais seems instead to have scuttled under the roof of English.[4] This may reflect a lack of confidence, a result of centuries of low status. Equally, it may be a product of the lack of ethnolinguistic identity; these two explanations are not mutually exclusive.

3. Writing in an unwritten language

3.1 Literacy practices in Guernesiais

One of the sets of questions on my language use questionnaire concerned literacy in Guernesiais. Only 13% of respondents to the postal questionnaire said that they ever write anything in Guernesiais, but 60% of face-to-face interviewees claimed to, which is a high proportion considering that they have never had any schooling or literacy training in Guernesiais (see section 2). The proportion of interviewees is probably higher because the sample was skewed towards interviewing 'primary contacts', many of whom are active in the language revitalisation movement. This is also reflected in the nature of what they write: mostly items for public and formal audiences, such as speeches, sermons, poetry, plays, news scripts, and readings for recitation – despite its affective role in speech, Guernesiais is hardly ever written for personal communications such as letters.

It is often claimed, by both speakers and non-speakers, that Guernesiais is not a written language. The title of this paper was inspired by a comment from a respondent to my survey: 'How can you write something that wasn't written?'. However, there is in fact a considerable corpus of literature in Guernesiais, both published (including the 19th-century works listed in 2.1), and unpublished, and there is a vibrant sub-culture of writing for cultural events and for the writers' own pleasure. Poetry is still one of the favourite genres, along with humorous stories and plays. The main fora (and stimuli) for creative writing in Guernesiais are cultural events such as the annual Eisteddfod and La Fête d'la Vieille Langue Normande, which are also an opportunity for pride in the language. The Eisteddfod also acts as a major forum for speaking Guernesiais among the audience.

Watson (1989: 49) notes that Scottish and Irish Gaelic are similarly associated with an unsophisticated, nonlearned folk culture; enthusiast

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[4] The image of 'scuttling', like a crab, is quite an apt one for Guernsey, as a local delicacy is the *chancre* or spidercrab, which has become a symbol of the island. For example, a website listing Guernsey facilities is called www.spidercrab.net.

groups tend to concentrate on folk songs and dance, poetry, traditional tales, and comic plays as tangible ways of expressing their attachment to the language. This phenomenon is a common feature of minority languages and is a recognised stage in language development, according to Kloss and Verdoodt (1969): the written form of a language generally begins with poetry, short stories, and fiction. The next stage unfolds once a language is used for nonnarrative prose, as some activists such as Marquis (1997), and the newspaper articles examined later in this paper, are starting to do in Guernesiais (see 3.2).

3.2 Standardisation attempts and resistance

It is relatively rare nowadays for a Western European language, even a minority one, not to possess a standard spelling or to be recognised officially. There have been numerous unofficial attempts at spelling systems for Guernesiais. George Métivier compiled the first dictionary in 1870, and contemporary writers praised him for having 'placé le guernesiais au nombre des idiomes reconnus et vivants' ['placed Guernesiais among the ranks of recognised and living tongues'] (Boland 1885:68). Métivier was descended from French settlers (Protestant Huguenot refugees), and was born in the main town, St Peter Port, where Guernesiais was more influenced by French due to trade links and the French émigré community located there (which included the French writer Victor Hugo, a friend of Métivier). In addition, Métivier was very much a product of his time: his poetry is often exceedingly sentimental in the Victorian fashion, and he may well have been tempted to 'civilise' Guernesiais by importing French elements, in accordance with the dominant status of French at that period.[5] He also wrote at a time when educated people were familiar with Standard French and its spelling conventions, whereas nowadays levels of knowledge of standard French are quite low. A number of Guernesiais speakers have told me that they find Métivier's poetry difficult to understand: as with many minority languages, the main speaker base nowadays is in the country areas, where

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[5] Métivier subtitled his trilingual collection of poetry, *Fantaisie Guernesiaise* (1866), '*dans le langage du pays, la langue de la civilisation, et celle du commerce*': 'in the local idiom [Guernesiais], the language of civilisation [French], an that of commerce [English]'. This illustrates perfectly the triglossic situation at the time. It is also noticeable that he calls Guernesiais a *langage* rather than a *langue*, reflecting its status as a *patois* rather than a full language.

the dialect accentuates the distance from French, e.g. with extensive dipthongisation.[6] (See section 5.2 for more on regional variation.)

In the 1960s a committee of native speakers from La Société Guernesiaise compiled what has become the most widely-used reference work, the *Dictiounnaire Angllais–Guernesiais* [English–Guernesiais Dictionary] (De Garis 1967, revised 1982). Although it is widely respected and represents a huge achievement, this dictionary has flaws. The compilers had no linguistic or lexicographical training, and it is not fully consistent. It sometimes seems unclear whether its main function is as a learner's dictionary, as a guide to old Guernsey culture, or as a record of archaisms (e.g. in her Preface, De Garis acknowledges her debt to a 1905 collection of botanical terms in Guernesiais). Its spelling is based on that of Métivier, which, as mentioned above, reflects his own background and environment. Some problems connected with this will be described below.

Numerous people attempt to write in Guernesiais without the benefit of education or dictionaries. Marjorie Ozanne (1897–1973) was one of the island's best-known Guernesiais authors. She wrote numerous poems, plays and short stories; many of the latter were published in a weekly column in the *Guernsey Evening Press*. (Ozanne was also more widely known for her bird hospital, which was featured on British television.) Hill (2000) collected and published some of her stories, with English translations, for a new generation of readers. Most of the stories were written between 1949 and 1965, and thus predate the De Garis Dictionary. In his foreword to the first volume of collected stories, Hill discusses Ozanne's spelling:

> In Marjorie's writing she seems to be trying to use a form of spelling that would sound comprehensible to an English speaker, rather than did the French based spelling of the previous writers of Guernesiais such as Métivier and Corbet. This adds, maybe, to their rustic authenticity, but is no easier to understand. One of her problems was that The Guernsey Evening Press, at the time, had some difficulty in printing French text with accents. (Hill 2000:2)

Although trained as a teacher, Ozanne clearly had little awareness of how to encode the structure of her native tongue. This is apparent from

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[6] This is known as *pâler pllat*, an interesting linguistic parallel to the term Plattdeutsch used to describe 'broader' dialects of Low German.

occasional strange word breaks and multiple different spellings of the same word. For example, on the very first page of the first story, one word is spelt in three different ways: *mesme, maesme, maeme* ('same'); on the same page, 'I don't know' is rendered first as *J'ensai*, then seven lines later *Je n'sai* (which reflects the grammar more accurately).

The majority of my respondents claim to use the spelling of the *Dictiounnaire Angllais–Guernesiais*, and some even say they go and see the editor, Marie de Garis, to ask her to check pieces which are for public consumption. This shows an overt awareness of the need for a common spelling, if not a standard; however, an examination of publications shows that in practice, writers often ignore it. There is also an element of mild anarchism in some writers' choice of spellings. In March 2002 I asked the poet Renée Jehan whether she used her sister's (i.e. dictionary compiler Marie de Garis') spelling system. She replied no, she used whatever felt right. Here is an example from one of my favourite poems from Jehan's (1999) collection:

> Faiti caöud, faiti caöud
> Faudrait énne bouanne raönde d'iaöue
> Tàmpérature dans les quater vingts
> Partout la Fouorêt et St Martin
> La chaleur r'baöndi hors d'la terre
> Et n'y'a pas rian qu'nous peut y faire.

The spelling here is fairly consistent and French-based, with the diphthongisation of Jehan's St Pierre du Bois dialect indicated by additional vowels and diereses (see the island map in Figure 2). On reflection, it is quite appropriate for the spelling of a poet who writes as she is inspired by her environment to reflect the way her words come to her. Such sentiments reinforce the strong affective element in much Guernesiais writing, and hence the resistance to standardisation.

Since October 2001, articles in Guernesiais have been published in a local weekly free newspaper, the *Globe* (with English translations). These are written by members of the language revival group, Les Ravigotteurs, and the stated aim is to help those trying to learn Guernesiais. Leading members of the group whom I met in September 2001 also told me that a secondary aim was to demonstrate that Guernesiais can be used to discuss modern topics. The subject-matter of the articles has thus covered, for example, the bombing of Afghanistan, traffic congestion, holiday homes in France, debate over remarks by a

local churchman, my own survey of language use, and ways to replenish stocks of the ormer (a shellfish unique to Guernsey). The articles display a variety of spellings, which are often in no way systematic. They demonstrate that writers are not always aware of how to encode the structure of Guernesiais (not surprising given the total lack of education in it), although some spellings show more awareness of French conventions than others. Here are some examples from articles published in late 2001 and early 2002:

(1) **'young':** *jonne* **in De Garis' Dictionary**

(1a) I' y a chiques s'moines que enne charmànte <u>jeuaune</u> faumme visiti ma faumme et mé.
'A few weeks ago a charming young woman visited my wife and me.' (24.10.2001)[7]

(1b) Quand j'etais <u>jeonne</u> – des souv'nirs du temps passair
'When I was young – some memories of times past' (14.10.01)

(1c) P'tete que ch'est parce-que ils airent eun des <u>jonne</u> gens qui l'airent laeux moto ch'est jours.
'Perhaps it is because they have one of these young people who have their own car nowadays.' (12.12.2001)

(2) **'only':** *riocqué* **in De Garis' Dictionary**

(2a) Raimblle-pas, ch'est pas <u>ll'ocques</u> des Etats qui deponsent!
'Don't forget, it's not only the States [parliament] who spend money!' (17.10.2001)

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[7] This is a reference to my own visit, commenting on the increased interest in Guernesiais from outside the island.

(2b)   Acoure aen caoup i sembllérait qué y a <u>rianqu</u>'énne p'tite
        dgêne des sians qui sièvent la Biblle qui saont tout à fait d'la
        maême idée
        'Once again it would seem that there is only a small group of
        those who follow the Bible who totally agree' (28.10.2001)

(2c)   Eshe-que y'en-a dauve tant d'sou, que avait <u>lloque</u> aen bouan
        r'pas pour Noue n'est pas assair?
        'Are there some people with so much money that merely
        having a good meal for Christmas is not enough?'
        (28.12.2001)

(2d)   Il me-r'semble que les numeros cretrais plus vite s'il ch'ete
        <u>iocque</u> permie d'allai sur eunne des marrais chaque mais
        'It seems to me that the numbers would grow if it were only
        permitted to go on one of the tides each month' (3.1.2002)

(3)   **'now': *auch't'haeure* in De Garis' Dictionary**

(3a)   Mais pour-chi qu'l'sétudiànts s'intéressent dans not' langue
        <u>ausht'haeure</u>?
        'But why are students interested in our language now?'
        (24.10. 2001)

(3b)   Le meis d'janvier a c'monchier bian, et nous a iaeu bouan
        p'tit temps jusque <u>auch't'haeure</u>
        'The month of January has started well, and we've had a bit
        of good weather up to now' (16.10.2002)

(3c)   Comme chena la banque saris p'tetre pas tournai fans en haut
        comme <u>osht'haeure</u>.
        'That way the beach would perhaps not be turned upside
        down like now.' (3.1.2002)

(4)   **'had' (past participle): *aeut* in De Garis' Dictionary**

(4a)   Les seon q'avait <u>llaeux</u> bouanne-chance chouaisissent aen
        parchounnier dauve chique ils son-allait jouair la gaume
        'Those who had had good luck chose a partner with whom
        they were going to play the game' (21.12.2001)

(4b)   nous a <u>iaeu</u> bouan p'tit temps jusque auch't'haeure
         'we've had a bit of good weather up to now' (16.1.2002)

Many of these spelling 'systems' have in common the use of <ll> for the phoneme /j/, which was originally used by Metivier, and later De Garis, where /l/ mutates to /j/ after plosive consonants, but it is used much more widely by some writers, including in word-initial locations such as in *llocques* or *llaeux* above (perhaps following Spanish usage).

Example (2c) shows the etymology of the term for 'only', as it comes from *rian que*, 'nothing but'; however, none of the examples in (3) show the etymology of 'now': *à chutte haeure* or 'at this hour'.

The replacing of French-style <ch> by <sh> for the phoneme /ʃ/ is one of the most common characteristics of Anglophone writers of Guernesiais. The following example, from a sketch written for a cultural festival, also includes this trait (but not consistently!):

Et bian tous lés coue que j'vians ishin v'la shü que j'vait, shés l'viàr assis a la tablle a berre du thée ét fumaïr sa pipe. Eche que vous avaï pas au-tchaöse a faire ? … Tu dit q'tu vas en travas, et bian tchi q'tas fait ogniet ?
'Well, every time I come here what do I see, it's the old man sitting at the table, drinking some tea and smoking his pipe. Don't you have anything else to do? … You say you're going to work, well what have you done today?'
(Mabel Torode: *Aen Baté* [A Boat], unpublished manuscript)

This extract was written for reading aloud, and the spelling is very clear for this purpose: simple, mostly consistent, following De Garis' spelling for the most part, but departing from it to make pronunciation clearer where necessary for non-French-speaking readers. The emphasis is on pronunciation rather than on transparency of grammatical features (e.g. no silent <s> on the end of *coue*, or <z> on *avaï*, as Standard French would have).

As well as being a major impetus for writing (as mentioned in 3.1), the institution of the annual Eisteddfod also plays a kind of standardising or policing role: pieces with too many Anglicisms or French elements are criticised by the adjudicators. However, the pieces which are performed are seldom published, and are usually written in the authors' or performers' own preferred notation (e.g. whichever way the writer finds

easiest to read out loud as in the example above), or sometimes in Standard French. One native speaker who is a member of the island's Parliament told me that when he has to make a speech in Guernesiais, he makes his notes in English.

For comparison, here is the above extract rewritten in the spelling of De Garis' Dictionary:

> Eh bian tous les caoups qué j'vians ichin, v'la chu qué j'veis[?], ch'est le viaer assis à la tablle à bère du thée et fumaïr sa pipe. Êche qué vous avaïz pas aoute chaouse à faire? … Tu dis qué tu vas en travas, eh bian tchi qu't'as fait ogniet?

One aspect that re-transcribing this short extract brought home to me is how laborious it is to look up every word. Not every word is included in the Dictionary, and not all forms of e.g. verbs (e.g. I had to surmise *veis* from parallel entries, and also had to consult De Garis' (1985) grammatical summary). It can be easier to find Guernesiais spellings by looking up the English equivalent, or by lateral thinking, than by trying to find them in the Guernesiais end of the Dictionary. No wonder many writers only consult it when unsure of a word. Education, including literacy training, in a systematic Guernesiais orthography would make the writing process more automatic and reduce the laboriousness.

Mauvoison (1979), commenting on the multiplicity of spellings suggested for Norman, points out that a standard spelling also makes it easier to decipher what is meant when reading. This is perhaps a rather obvious point, but it is even more true if the reader is not a native speaker and has to guess at the structure and pronunciation due to the lack of a standard spelling. I myself find it easiest to read works in Guernesiais aloud, in order to gauge pronunciation and then mentally match what I have read with phrases I have heard spoken and thus decipher them.

This lack of consistency in spelling makes it especially difficult to develop fluency in reading. Fluent readers do not usually decode each letter of every word, but use word-recognition to take a mental snapshot of words and phrases, and fit them to a schema of what they think the text is saying (Wallace 1992: 40–42). Fluent readers of English can see how difficult it is to decode random or unexpected spelling by trying to read the following extract from *Feersum Endjinn* by Iain M. Banks (which is in fact more consistent than many Guernesiais texts):

Well, Ergates sez (& u can juss tel she's tryin 2 b payshint) aside from the fact that it is folly 2 fro away even 1 life out ov 8, & thi eekwilly sailyent poynt that in thi present emerginsy it mite b fullish 2 rely on thi effishint funkshining ov thi reeincarnative prossess, ther is my own safety 2 think about. (Banks 1994: 18)

Sum flox reckin its oll 2 do wif thi approachin enkroachin; they fink thi kaotic levils ov thi kript ½ sumhow woken up 2 thi fact that fings cude eventjulie get a bit hazardis even 4 them. (ibid: 79)

In his report on experiments in teaching Guernesiais, Tomlinson (1994) remarks that it is difficult for modern learners in a school situation to learn without taking notes, so the lack of a standard spelling hampered his pupils. One of the potential functions of orthography is to reflect the grammatical structure of a language, which might aid those learning it. In an environment where Guernesiais is only spoken by about 5% of the population, and even native speakers find it difficult to find interlocutors, those trying to learn Guernesiais as a second language might find reading it a helpful way of keeping in practice – if they could rely on the orthography to reflect the pronunciation and structure.

Until recently it might have been thought that video and audio technology had reduced our civilisation's dependence on the written word, but the rise of the Internet has raised literacy to even greater importance. Many endangered language communities are now taking advantage of the Internet to make themselves known, to keep dispersed communities in touch with each other, and to compile corpora and dictionaries. Once again, such activities are not possible without a written standard. [8] The development of such infrastructure for Guernesiais has been hampered by the lack of funding and any government support, by the age of most of the native speakers (and hence their unfamiliarity with these new media), and by other priorities.[9]

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[8] The lack of an accepted standard orthography also makes it difficult for a linguist to conduct concordancing studies of written Guernesiais, as the variety of different spellings constantly exceeds expectations.

[9] There are four main groups of language enthusiasts, as well as individuals not allied to any of the groups. The groups have different views on the most effective way to promote Guernesiais, but fragmentation is prevented by an umbrella body, la Coumité d'la Culture Guernesiaise. This means, however, that combined events tend to be of the type that all can agree on, such as festivals.

5 Which standard?

5.1 How should a standard be decided?

My survey of language use included a question on 'how should a standard be decided?', but it was answered by relatively few, indicating the intractability of the question. Most of those who answered saw a need for a language authority of some kind (although English does not have one):

- Somebody like l'Assembllaie d'Guernesiais [a language society]
- Need a body to recognise/standardise the language
- Should reflect affinity to Norman French and standard French, but without too much complexity or accommodation to standard French at the expense of Norman
- By those who write it
- By those who speak it and understand the origins
- Should be based on French as we are cousins to the French
- Should try to have a standard but be understanding.

De Garis' Dictionary was originally prepared by what might constitute such an authority: a committee of the Philological Section of La Société Guernesiaise, but comments disagreed about its suitability:

- It would have to be Marie de Garis' Dictionary [2]
- De Garis' Dictionary has too much French in it
- I find De Garis' dictionary confusing
- The Dictionary is useful

Other respondents mentioned likely problems:

- Very few people will attempt to write it - no call for it, no readership
- Is there any point in writing something which was oral?
- Difficult to get everyone to agree
- But it won't happen!

It can easily be seen that even if the will existed for standardisation of Guernesiais, it would be difficult to reach a consensus. Nevertheless, only one respondent was strongly against any standard spelling.

5.2 Regional variation

Many respondents also raised the issue of how regional differences should be catered for; their character is highly prized. Guernesiais shares with many unwritten minority languages the trait of being fragmented into numerous different local varieties, with no recognised standard or prestige variety. The regional variations of Guernesiais divide into two main groups: the West, known as the *haut pas* or high parishes, and the *bas pas* or lower parishes in the North (see Figure 2). These terms reflect the island's topology and have nothing to do with the sociolinguistic terms 'High' and 'Low' varieties. They are further subdivided into parish variations; it is still possible to tell a person's origin within a mile or two.
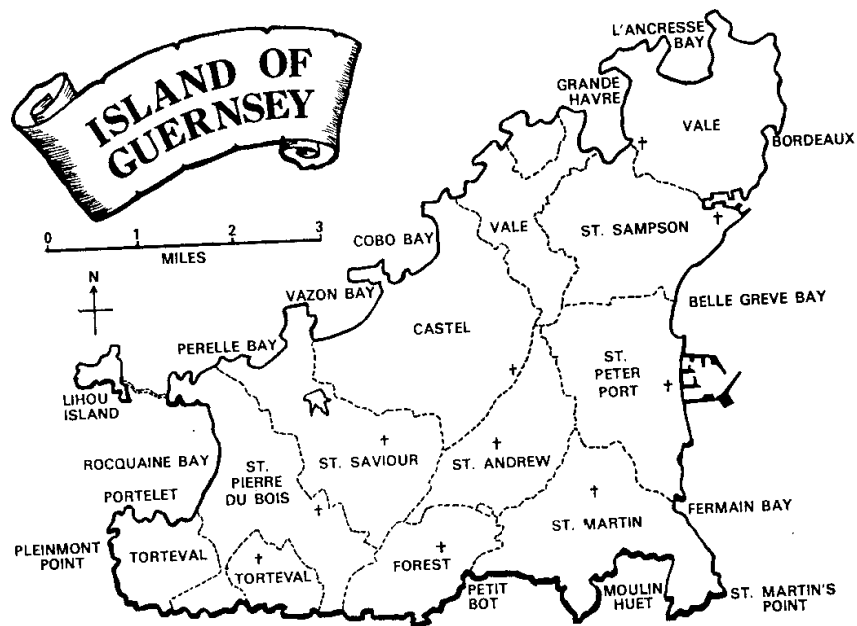

Fig. 2 Map of Guernsey showing parishes (from De Garis 1975)

Many of the respondents to my survey commented that any standardisation would be difficult due to the diversity of local varieties. Several jokingly suggested that their own variety should be the standard. Others stressed the need to a standard to be flexible enough to cope with different variations.

The majority of respondents assumed that spelling needs to reflect the sounds of the language; hence their concern for regional variations – which might also account for part of the grammatical inconsistency of the spellings seen in the examples in 3.2. These respondents did not recognise that standard orthographies which have grown more or less organically, such as English and French, emphasise other attributes such as etymology or grammar over phonetic transparency, and can thus cater for a number of different accents and dialects. Nevertheless, from the experience of these languages, respondents are right to be concerned for the preservation of regional diversity: most standard languages promote one regional variety over others, and the standard in French and English was not chosen democratically (Grillo 1989).

Joseph (1987) notes that a standard is often based on the variety used by an urban intelligentsia; but in Guernsey, the main town, St Peter Port, is almost entirely English-speaking, and has been for nearly a century. If a standard variety were to be chosen on the basis of vitality and number of speakers, it would undoubtedly be the *haut pas* one; but favouring one variety could easily bring resentment. An analogous situation persists in Romantsch-speaking areas of Switzerland, where there are five main regional varieties; several attempts at standardisation were rejected, and it still remains to be seen whether the latest official attempt gains wide acceptance (Holker 1990).

Although Métivier (1831) described himself as a *Câtelain* due to having relatives in the parish of Câtel (see Figure 2), his spelling reflects that of the North and East, in particular the use of /k/, which he spells in the French way: <qu>, where the Western dialects use /tʃ/, for example in *qué* vs. *tchai*, meaning 'what'. The *haut pas*, consisting of the parishes of Torteval, St Pierre du Bois, and St Saviour's, is the area where Guernesiais is nowadays spoken most often, and where it is still possible to hear it spoken in pubs, shops, and along the coast. As noted in 3.2, the *haut pas* dialect is the most distinct from Standard French, notably in its diphthongisation of vowels, and there are also lexical variations. The northern variety now has very few speakers, most of whom have few or no Guernesiais interlocutors; nevertheless, two of the best-known writers of Guernesiais, Métivier and Marjorie Ozanne, came from the *bas pas*, which is reflected in their orthography. Although the majority of the 1960s dictionary compiling committee spoke *haut pas* varieties, they chose to continue using Métivier's French-based spelling due to his high standing as the national poet. As noted in 3.2, this can mean that modern readers who are not familiar with French spelling find it difficult to read.

5.3 Standard French?

A couple of respondents to my survey suggested that Standard French should be used as the written version of Guernesiais, as it was historically the High variety. Most street names in Guernsey are still written in (more or less) Standard French, although many monolingual Anglophone islanders now find them difficult to pronounce and understand. Differences between Guernesiais and French can cause problems with this 'solution': for example, 'trees', although denoted by the same word (*arbres*), are feminine in Guernesiais (as in Latin), but masculine in Standard French.[10] More adjectives come before the noun in Guernesiais than in French, especially colours. Verbs are also conjugated differently, notably the use of the first person singular pronoun (*je*) with a plural verb for 'we': e.g. *j'allaons for* 'we go'. Increasingly replacing this structure, however, is an impersonal pronoun, *nou* (equivalent to French *on* not *nous*) plus a third person singular verb (as in example 3b in 3.2): thus, 'we go' becomes *nou vo*.[11] The tense system is also different: e.g. it shows contact features such as *à* plus infinitive for a continuous form (as in the extract from the play *Aen Baté* in 3.2), and is becoming simplified, e.g. the increasing use of *s'en allaïr* (to be going to) instead of the future (as in example 4a in 3.2). Prosody also differs: word stress in Guernesiais is usually on the first syllable. Some Guernesiais speakers (e.g. Ainger 1995: 11) even claim that Guernesiais cannot be written without French elements creeping in, due to the tradition of Standard French as the High, written variety.

De Garis' spelling system *looks* a lot more similar to Standard French than Guernesiais actually *sounds*, and so could misleadingly over-emphasise similarity with French. Tomlinson (1994) played recordings of French and Guernesiais to speakers of the other, and found that only about 25% was mutually intelligible. Jones (2000) points out that the short grammar of Guernesiais published by De Garis in 1985, and Tomlinson's (1981) lexical and syntactic survey, both include more French elements than are actually heard in spoken Guernesiais. This would be another reason for eschewing French orthography in favour of a system which emphasised the Guernsey and Norman identity. Lukis (1976/79, 1981/85)

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[10] One of numerous instances where Standard French has diverged more from older patterns.

[11] *Nous* is used, however, as in French, for the accusative first person plural pronoun ('us').

made proposals for an orthography which would promote *Ausbau* by underlining the differences between Guernesiais and French, while also catering for readers educated through English. Lukis also claimed that the diacritics and apostrophes often used in Guernesiais make it look more like a corrupt dialect of French, which detractors are all too fond of claiming that it is.

On the other hand, Fernand Lechanteur, a French scholar of Norman in the first half of the 20th century (Mauvoisin 1979), proposed a pan-Norman spelling system which would act as a unifying 'roof' for the varieties spoken in Guernsey, Jersey, and in continental Normandy, which are more or less mutually intelligible; speakers of all three meet annually for La Fête d'la Vieille Langue Normande mentioned in 3.1. As with the unified spelling created for the five Romantsch-speaking areas in Switzerland (Holker 1990), this would be a written standard only, allowing the spelling to be interpreted in different ways according to the local pronunciation. This orthography is more or less accepted in Normandy, but Lechanteur's work is little known on Guernsey, and is espoused by only a small minority there. It follows French spelling conventions on the assumption that readers will be familiar with them, but as we have seen, this can no longer be assumed in the Channel Islands. The choice is a fundamental one of whether to face towards the UK or France in terms of language loyalty. Should vocabulary and orthography reflect a Norman/Romance identity? Or should they recognise the fact that most Guernsey residents speak English and do not find it easy to read French spelling – which would entail distancing themselves from their Norman cousins, a link stressed at the annual Fête d'la Vieille Langue Normande?

5.4 Purism or modernisation?

Not only regional variation is involved in this debate, but also diachronic. Should a standard reflect the language when it was purer, with fewer Anglicisms, or should it 'move with the times'? Guernesiais enthusiasts are split between those who want to see it modernised and taught in schools, and purists whose affective attachment to their native language is also to a bygone culture. There are some native speakers of Guernesiais who would rather let it die with them than see it develop out of all recognition from the language they know and love. Once again the question of language and identity is raised, as well as potential splits between enthusiasts. Younger campaigners are keener to divorce the

language from the traditional culture that older native speakers identify with and regret the passing of.

It can be tempting for some campaigners, as well as some linguists, to think that it would be easier to teach a modern, standardised, hybrid form of an obsolescent language if the different dialects and those who espouse them were no longer there (see below for an example of this in the Isle of Man). But it must not be forgotten that these older native speakers are an important source of both the language and its oral traditions, many of which have not yet been recorded for posterity.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Implications and values in standardisation

The term 'standardisation' can be used to denote several levels of overcoming differences: from voluntary accommodation and harmonising, to regulation and prescriptivism. Joseph (1987:16–18) notes that standardisation almost invariably entails prescriptivism, especially in education. This is just the kind of situation that most of my respondents would like to avoid (see the comments cited in 5.3).

The choice of new terminology for a language whose own development has been neglected does not simply involve choosing arbitrary signs or value-free words; it can also imply 'buying in' to the ideology of the standardisation models presented by both English and French, with their baggage of domination and prescriptivism. The consensus seems to be that Guernesiais should not follow these examples. As seen in the *Globe* articles in 3.2, language revivalists seem at present to be 'voting with their pens' in the opposite direction. For example, the *Bulletins* of L'Assembllaie d'Guernesiais include the statement *Notaai s'y vous pllait: L'Epellage des les articles du Bulletin a etaai lesi a la discretion des contribuables*. [Please note: spelling in the articles of the Bulletin has been left to the discretion of the contributors'.]

6.2 Prospects

A major problem for many minority languages is that the dominant language is now so entrenched that no use is seen for a written version of the minority language (or indeed for the language at all). There is no longer any communicative need for Guernesiais to be written: English has

taken over all the functions for which writing is necessary. The market for publications in Guernesiais is very small, and they need subsidisation to be viable. In other countries subsidies are provided by official bodies, but in Guernsey the government is simply not interested in saving the indigenous language. At present La Société Guernesiaise publishes a few works (e.g. De Garis 1982, Hill 2000), or the authors and friends pay for printing themselves (e.g. Jehan 1999). La Société Guernesiaise is now seeking commercial sponsorship for a coursebook and CD-Rom that could be used in schools.

The future of Guernesiais does not look bright, given the almost total lack of interest from the island parliament, despite the efforts of two native-speaker deputies (members). However, the founding of Les Ravigotteurs in 1995 demonstrates increased awareness among younger people of the importance of linguistic heritage: perhaps a sign of the 'attitude shift' observed by Dorian (1993), 'common among the members of a community two generations after the one which failed to pass its language on' (Crystal 2000: 106).

The received wisdom in the field of endangered languages is that of Fishman (1991): that promoting the speaking of a language in the home is the most effective way of saving it, and that focusing on use outside the home, such as in schools, or expanding its domains, can wait. However, the vast majority of my informants said that their families had stopped speaking Guernesiais in the home because English was the language of school (see section 2). This means that issues of status, official recognition and standardisation need to be tackled. Unless this happens, Guernesiais will be extinct within 50 years.

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