



Madeleine's Mother's Tongue

Madeleine I believe a language is like a vehicle, like you...words are words but what you put in the words is up to you.....

..... Breton was the language of the old people, the generation above us.....

.....One spoke Breton - it has a donkey hat.....

.....You have it in your head without knowing you have it.....

.....My, my life uhhh is a Tryskell. Three, three parts have been always squeezed in between three generation, I'm in the middle, I was born between three departments. Now I've got three languages it seems that with me, everything come in three.....

Narrator " I don't want to talk about poverty or politics," Madeleine announced on our first meeting to discuss working together . "The first has been done already and the second I know nothing about." "That's fine", I assured her, "It's you're life and the connection to the Breton language we're really interested in." She eyed me sceptically and then suggested that no one would find her interesting. Assuming, (correctly as it happens,) that she would not be moved by flattery, I tried a different tack. "But I don't know anything about what it's like to have lived with all these languages, I was hoping you could tell me." Satisfied, Madeleine asked "Where do you want me to start?". How about at the beginning. So she began, when she was 8.

Madeleine I remember was the beauty of the countryside. The freshness of the morning when you had the dew on the field. When the, you take the cow out, uh, going into the field with a the bunch of cow and the dogs and the dogs barking, the echo of the birds, specially in spring.

Another thing that I have in mind is the winter at night when it was winter and the earth was very cold and um there was a , called the 'gelée' uh, when there was a frost and the earth was very hard. We sometime went to the neighbours in the evening. Then there was what they call the 'filage', it's a well-known word in Breton when the neighbours gathered, the men play cards, the women chat and, uh, the children play and we were allowed sometime to go outside and there was a moon and you had the shadow of the moon in the stree... on the trees. There was not a lot of electricity, there was..., so it was the moving of the shadows outside and we play 'hide and seek' at night and we were play being frightened . We were not really frightened but, hiding in the shadow of the trees and, uh, and we came back about maybe eleven o'clock and then we had, uh, coffee and crepes. And then we went back and, as we did wear clog at the time as the earth was hard with the, the coldness, you had the call of the clog on the earth and you had the shadow of the moon quivering and coming back home and people chatted a lot. That was a nice memory.

Narrator

Madeleine quite rightly pointed out that hers is not an exceptional story, and pulled a face when I suggested that her life was representative of a generation. No one wants to think of themselves as a piece of living social history. Madeleine was born in Central Brittany, into the austere atmosphere of postwar Europe. The daughter of tenant farmers, her time was divided between school and working on the farm. I had asked her to recall one vivid memory which would sum up what it was like to be a child at that time.

This description is made more poignant by the fact that even at the tender age of eight, Madeleine knew that when she was sixteen, she was destined to become an economic migrant.

Madeleine

Lot of people on the farm, you went to your local school until, it was a Primary school, until you were fourteen years old. You took what was called your 'Certificat d'Etude', succeed or not and then, you work on the farm. I leave Brittany, I was hardly 16 years old. The reason is for work, you had to work. There was no work in Brittany. You certainly didn't want to live like your parents, no way .I always knew that I will go to Paris when I was maybe 8, 9 years old. That what my sister did. That what my brother did, it was the thing to do. There was no work in Rostrenen. So it was easy to go. I stayed with my elder sister, thirty years old and so there was a job waiting for me in Paris. That was easy when you knew how to read and write.

- Narrator And what about the language? Madeleine's generation lived in a bi-lingual world. She spoke French, was educated in French and was expected to speak French at home. But she also understood spoken Breton. It was the public language of the older generation and the private language of her parents.
- Madeleine When I was young, OK we all, Breton was the language of the old people, the generation above us. When I hear all the interview of elderly people who spoke Breton and they speak about their childhood, those are people who are over eighty now, and it was a time when they all went, not all but most of them in the Gouarec area, went to school and didn't know French and they were punished. Like my mother, my mother was born in 1906 and my father as well, so they were punished. This and that. But then that has gone. So I understand those speak about it with, they suffer about it. But then the generation after, they were bi-lingual. They were bi-lingual, they went to, when they went to school. But then there was uh, so I understand those people had a hard time with the language but the generation after that, they didn't have that.
- Narrator Madeleine could not afford to remain at school after sixteen and agricultural work was scarce. She was expected to set aside her Mother's tongue. The French language, it seems, had become her economic passport. She left her family and close rural community to begin a new life in one of the major capitals of Europe. I tried putting my sixteen year old self in that situation but couldn't imagine it.
- Madeleine It was such a drastic change of life. People acted differently. It was very intimidating. They did look so clever. They were well dressed. They spoke beautifully about thing I didn't understand at all. They had different habits. I did feel very clumsy. I did feel I knew nothing. It was fantastic to be in Paris the capital of France. I had to take the tubes, the underground to go to work. That was fantastic after you had so much trouble to move when you were in Brittany. I was very impressed, very intimidated.
- Narrator And so began Madeleine's life long passion for learning. If the French language had been Madeleine's passport to Paris, another language was to play an important part in her destiny. Madeleine had plans to travel far further than Paris.
- Madeleine When I was 18, 19 I wanted to go to Canada so I went to the Embassy and then they just told me 'you have to learn English and come back when you've learnt English' but, around me I didn't know people who went that way. I was just a dreamer I suppose and I didn't find my way. I didn't have enough maturity obviously now as I look at it that way. Later on then when I was 28 was on my way to Australia that

time, not to, to Canada but I was told if you want to come back to France, go to England because there you would have English course and then you can come back to France with English in your head and I remember replying to that person 'I'm on my way to Australia. I'm not going to come back'. But then I never been to Australia. I stop in England which was also very interesting. And at that time it was easy to, to be 'au pair'. I went as an 'au pair'. I left a job, a nice flat and my friends, back to square 1 in England back to be 'au pair' which was very convenient because you had bed and food and I had free time during the day to go to courses, 2 hours of English every day and it was not very expensive. It was very good course, and then, after a while, after taking my first certificate, I went back to typing secretarial, translating, administrating and, and all sorts of jobs.

Narrator So Madeleine studied in England, and learned her third language. When she talks of this time as a mature student, her face shines. Her passion for language is obvious.

Madeleine After having worked for 12 years, being 'au pair' when you didn't have to bother about your lodging and your food. You had just to learn English. It was such an opening of mine it was such a luxury to be like a sort of student which I'd never been in my life. I, I was a student because I was working and studying but I wasn't a student in a university, and there I met so many people from different countries. We were in a class with different nationality and just starting to be able to communicate in a language which was not your own language and you start to meet Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, people from all over the world and to be able to communicate is, is a miracle, is, is so magic and it gave you the want to learn more & more. The want to communicate & uh, for me, personally who didn't study academically it was opening doors that I would have never dreamed. And having free time for studying as well & being 28 years old I had a maturity already. I had some years, I had some experience behind me & it seems that although all of the door of every country of the world suddenly opened with the magic words of English. We could communicate. I had the freedom of not having children, being free of myself and then I met people of all sort of work. People different religion, different culture, different backgrounds and a different outlook on life and that was such a wealth of looking at the world. I could see the world differently through their eyes. I suppose now I think people who have studied may not see it that way but for somebody like me it was a change that I realise it was such a good thing I did to go out and to see a world I didn't know about.

Narrator All these years later, Madeleine is still going to night school. Like many people, retirement has brought her back home. A

homing bird flying back to the coop. Her focus remains with language. She returns to study the language of her childhood only to find that it is entirely different. It is Modern Breton. I have suggested we attend one of her classes. She agrees to seek permission for us to record at the last session of the term.

Madeleine greeting class members in Breton

Narrator It's a strangely sad event. We turn up early at the community centre, to set up. Despite being on the coast, it's uncomfortably humid. The eight students arrive and seem vaguely disappointed that the promised exotic radio people turn out to be three rather boring middle aged Brits with a couple of hand recorders. One of the students, a retired Parisian, pointedly begins showing the others a film on his laptop, of his latest video recording of himself; skydiving. The teacher, a shy, serious young man, has brought drink and food for everyone because it is the last lesson of the year.

Madeleine and the students speaking in Breton and some French.

Narrator It's poignant because Madeleine has told us there is a possibility that she will not be returning to the class in the Autumn. It's also possibly the starkest learning environment I have ever been in. There isn't so much as a poster listing establishment rules. Apart from a white wipe board and the obligatory battleship grey tables and chairs, there is nothing. You would really have to want to learn, to sit in that room for three hours.

Madeleine I happened to see there was Breton courses as I said and my first, 'What a strange idea' and then I thought I would like to learn to read it and I thought I would be easy but, in fact, I had a lot to learn. But now I can relate to what I knew and, uh, and, and sometimes we learn words and I think 'Oh that is very literare' we don't use it every day. But on the radio, Radio Bro Gwened, and when they interview people from different regions, people who are Breton mother tongue use that word, I say 'ah strange', it's not such literare but it was not known in my region, not used in my region. But now I found it very, very satisfying because, uh, speaking is still, uh, it's not easy for me. I manage but not always easy but I can understand different parts of Brittany. I can understand people from the Leon or Tregor and I can understand people from Morbihan or different accent and different way of speaking and that I found very interesting and maybe I have more.. is easier for me than young people who might not understand. But I had, at the beginning, uh, also difficulty in, in understanding young people who've been to 'diwan' school or bi-lingual school because they, they use a different vocabulary, a different accent. Of course their accent is French, it can't be otherwise,

it can't be German. But some speak it very, very, very well and it was for me to get used to and the modern words.

Musical break

Narrator A few days later, we return to Madeleine's stylish, modern, coastal home. I intend to ask her to reflect on the experience so far, and we do this over one of Madeleine's generous lunches.
Feeling we know her a little better, one of us gets up the nerve to address the elephant in the room. We need to know why, for those around her, learning Breton is a touchy subject.

Madeleine It's a very touchy things which I didn't expect. When I came back to Brittany I didn't realise that it was such a, again a touchy and, uh, I didn't know the history of it all and, uhhh, yes there are some people who are very..... it creates anger in some people that there was courses in Breton and, uh, yes that did surprise me. So now, some are 'Yes, why not?' and some people said 'What for?'

Narrator On the journey home, I am full of admiration, for whilst Madeleine is not a radical, she is rather single minded. Her return to the Breton language, began as a lovely idea, to read and write in her mother's tongue. But the Breton language had changed. The Celtic cultural revolution of the 70's had happened whilst she was elsewhere. She had no idea of the connection between her mother tongue and the cultural schism, between those who see speaking their mother tongue as a backward step, and those who wish to promote the language in all aspects of modern living. Madeleine seems to have quietly got on with learning the language, whilst attempting to fit in with everyone else. But then, she's had years of practice fitting in, without causing cultural offence as her story of her moving to Paris and the boiled sweet clearly illustrates.

Madeleine I remember one thing, a funny thing, just a little stupid thing. I had been.... I think it was my first day at work and one person offer me a sweet and of course like you did in Brittany at that time 'Oh no no thanks' and she put her sweets away and I was thinking 'How rude'. I would have loved a sweet but in Brittany you have to, to, to refuse 2 or 3 times and the person had to insist because it would have been so rude to take a sweet first time and I thought she was rude to put them away immediately, not to offer 2 or 3 times. But soon I learn, when you are offered something, you take it if you want or you say no. It's no! Just things like that

Narrator Our next interview has us all on tenter hooks. Madeleine has expressed a wish to hear children singing in Breton and so the editor suggested we take her to interview the head mistress

of a Diwan school, where the children are taught with Breton as their first language and record some of the children. Madeleine was excited at the prospect of the visit but when the day arrived, appeared uncharacteristically daunted. The crew were also a bit subdued, the last people to interview Madame Le Gall were journalists from CNN so it all seems a bit 'grown up'. There's a tense start as we make our introductions and settle into a small anti-room. The plan is that Madeleine will conduct the interview.

Madeleine and Mme Le Gall speaking in Breton about the 'Diwan'

Narrator Madeleine's reflection on this visit was an interesting one. She began to tell my husband about the visit, a few weeks after the interview. 'What a trick they played on me', she laughed, 'don't worry, they said, we'll tell you what to say, and then when the recording started, there was just me, not a peep from them!' She was right of course, we had mostly kept quiet because, after all, it was her curiosity of Diwan that was of most interest to us.

After the interview, we were led to a light airy classroom, filled with tiny ethereal beings. They were the prettiest, and most earnest children I have ever seen. They eyed us expectantly as we shuffled in. A little girl, dressed as a fairy, held my gaze solemnly as I fumbled about with the recorder. Not normally sentimental, I feel quite moved by the diminutive choir and then I look over at Madeleine. Her main reason for wanting to come to the school was to hear Breton sung by children. Her tender expression brings a lump to my throat and I concentrate on the sound levels.

Recording of the children singing in Breton.

Narrator Off the recorder, Madeleine remarks on how different the school is from her own rural, post war education. I ask her what the children were singing about and she tells me it's a nursery rhyme about straw and hay. She says it with a straight face. It is of course no different from the manufacturing rhymes of the North of England. Nobody winds up the bobbin nowadays. We ask her why some people worry about children learning Breton, and she patiently explains as the children have another go with the straw and hay.

Madeleine I believe I heard of things that parents of people who haven't experienced bi-lingual children feared for the children and they, they have ideas in the head that the child will have difficulty. There is a thing in advance whereas when people have seen bi-lingual children and become tri-lingual with no problem and who have no problem in life, then people understand that it is the idea in people that the child is going to become confused. The child is not confused, the parents are confused.

Narrator Later, she reveals that she feels she has more in common with young students of modern Breton. She has a habit of coming out with such revelations, when there is no recorder switched on. I ask her to elaborate, and she explains, somewhat mysteriously, that they have less cultural baggage and just a love of the language. Then, she changes the subject. She often does this.

The next interview does not go according to plan. The next person Madeleine is interviewing is supposed to be Cornish. He isn't. His young son, who has attended a bi-lingual school, is too embarrassed to join Madeleine in a Breton conversation. He resists her gentle charm and a chasm of silence ensues. I am mentally banging my head on the table, when Madeleine fills the silence with an anecdote about her mother's childhood, which perfectly illustrates the history of the attempted suppression of the Breton language.

Madeleine When they were in the playground they were forbidden to speak Breton. The only problem is, only the teacher knew French and that was the generation of my parents. They were born, my parents were born in 1906, and when.... there was one donkey hat you know, make of paper, a donkey hat that you put on the head and, there was only one so... the thing is, the child, the children, they were supposed to speak French but they couldn't and if one spoke Breton it has a donkey hat and it had to pass it on to the one who would speak in Breton. So, what the children did, they spoke in Breton to their friends so they could pass it on. So my mother told me she was in school in Brittany so the one who had the donkey hat had to stand up, had to stand up to put his hand on the back, bend his head and go round and round on his own on the playground. And it was said, this, this, this, 'shame to you, shame to you'. That was a thing, that was a school at that time.

Narrator Warming to her subject, Madeleine then goes on to describe how educational social control can backfire, with the story of her elder brother and the witness.

Madeleine One of my brother told me, he is ten years older than I am. At home he grew up with both language was more spoken French like all of us. So when he went to school he, he spoke more French than Breton. He understood Breton but was not used to speaking it. So, once he went to school, that was still on and they had a little, what they call it, a 'témoin'. They had a little stone or a little thing, the witness. So, again in the school even at that time the children spoke Breton and he didn't speak a lot of Breton but, the last...when you had the, the witness, you had to pass it on, you didn't want to be the last one because, if you were the last one to have it you were punished. So, instead, he learned Breton in the playground

because the one who has the, the, the witness wanted to, to get rid of it and, in order to get rid of it, you spoke in Breton so you had answer in Breton so that's the way it was. And the one who had it back were detained after school, had to stay at school and ,uh my brother, that brother was born in 1937. I haven't known that in my time, I haven't known that.

Narrator At our next meeting, I revisit Madeleine's statement that she prefers speaking Breton with young people. I am interested because, in my research, I have read that older Bretons are rarely keen to speak to young Breton speakers. Madeleine quickly comes up with an explanation from the past, illustrating the problem of different dialects.

Madeleine Going to Breton lesson at the beginning we have a, a very good teacher and we still have very good teacher but they are young. They learnt it sometime when they are, they were twenty and now they are teaching it. But, me, I've, I've never had to learn it, it was around me and once the other teacher corrected my pronunciation even and I knew and I was well, I didn't say that, 'how dare she' it is a way why it was said in my region and she learn it at twenty years old. I was born with it and after I went I said yes.... But it's also a lesson of modesty to, to accept from somebody much younger, less experienced than you, something that concern you. I hear sometime uh, youngsters, they know... more than you do, it's not because you are retired and you have white hair that you know better so you uh, it makes you mmm, more careful and started to be a little bit more modest. I think 'they might know better than me' after all.

Narrator So Modern Breton is often not understood by the older generation, hence the anxiety of many linguists about the future of the language. I have found articles on the matter grim reading, with some academics predicting the death of a generation and the language along with them. Academics also describe the reluctance of older people conversing in their mother tongue because of past inhibitions brought about the historical stigma of speaking the old language, and more recent anxieties about political activism. Madeleine, the modern Breton speaker, is far more up beat.

Madeleine I believe a language is a, like a vehicle like you, words are words but, what you put in the words is up to you. I think it's like a car and what you put in the car is up to you. But a car is a car, it's a transport and a language is a mean of communicating, what you communicate, that is another thing but the communi....it's communicating. You communicate whatever uh, happiness, sadness, religious, politic, whatever you want. That's you as a person. Words are there in any language and uh, if there are young children who are in bi-ligual school when I hear them singing in Breton or it's uh,

it's very moving to me.

Narrator

I have spent the summer with Madeleine, and she has told her story. It seems clear that language has been and still is her passion. It was clear as she handed out novels to the crew, to improve their French. It was clear as she leaped on any new idioms as we chatted. (She particularly liked 'it must be something in the water.')

It was clear as she watched the Diwan children singing their Breton nursery rhyme. Three languages, three lives, like the Tryskell. Importantly, at least for me, her passion is contagious. 'Everyone has their own way of learning a language,' she says, "you just have to find yours. Pursue it, don't let it get away, just because it's difficult."

.....So that is the story of the 3 languages of Madeleine and her mother's tongue and, as this is the end, it is only fitting that Madeleine's mother, on a lovingly preserved 1970's tape, should have the last word.

A recording of Madeleine's mother speaking her native tongue - Breton.

