

Simon interviewing Kristen Tonnelle who is compiling a Breton dictionary

Simon

I'm here with Kristen Tonnelle, who is engaged in – would you call it your life's work ?

Kristen

Yes, I suppose you could call it my life's work, yes.

Simon

And what is it you're .. ?

Kristen

It's a dictionary. It's a Breton-French dictionary, for the web.

Simon

For the web ?

Kristen

Yep, not on paper

Simon

And how long have you been working on it ?

Kristen

I started working on it, I don't know, maybe fifteen years ago. But you know... when, um I started, when I started I thought I would take notes. I'm not a native Breton speaker. As most Breton speakers, when you hear something new, something rare, something interesting, you think, oh I won't remember it if I don't write it down somewhere. Usually you do it on papers, and you lose your papers and lose everything. So, I thought it might be a good idea to put it on a computer, just notes. And then they grew, and they grew so much that after a while I thought maybe I should consider making a dictionary out of it. And I didn't imagine at that time that it would be such a long work.

Simon

So I'm picking up an Irish accent in your English. You are French, but you... ?

Kristen

I'm not French.

Simon

You're not French ?

Kristen

I am Breton.

Simon

You are Breton. I beg your pardon. I guess I misunderstood when you said you were not a native Breton speaker.

Kristen

No. Yeah, I am not a native Breton speaker, but I am Breton. Yeah, I spent five years in Ireland forty years ago, fifty years ago ?

Simon

So you said it's a dictionary for the web, which is interesting. Why that particularly ... ?

Kristen

Yeah. Well, I didn't, as I said intend to make a dictionary first, but once I started to make it with a computer, I thought it might be a good idea to spread it on the web. And then you realise that, contrary to the paper thing, where once it's done it's done, if you want to change something you have to wait until the next edition.

Simon

Yeah

Kristen

On the web, if you see a mistake you can correct it on the spot. With the web, I can take advantage of everything the web can offer. For example, sound. I've got thousands and thousands of examples, sentences. Most of them are from papers or novels. And for leading authors, I ask them to read their lines, so that if you're looking for a word, just google it and you have the pronunciation.

Simon

So, given that you're using the web to do things, as you say, so a pronunciation link is the most obvious thing, would you also link other historical facts, or other links to other sources perhaps, or ..?

Kristen

Well, to other sources, yes, because you can find on the web a lot of texts that over 60 years I think. So when I – I have an example from this text, there's a link to the original or to other sites in Breton

Simon

Are there or is there an archive of the language ? A recorded archive of the language ?

Kristen

Very few.

Simon

Yeah

Kristen

Very few. All the French state sponsors were the death of the language, by schools and everything. So, one hundred years ago half of the people living in Brittany didn't know a word of French, only they speak only Breton. And nowadays we've got ten per cent of Bretons that can understand Breton.

Simon

So where do you search ? How do you come across

Kristen

Once I decide, Once I decided to make a full dictionary, I started with other dictionaries, and then with Google, trying to find examples, written examples of a word.

Simon

Yeah, right

Kristen

I use a lot of newspapers from 1860 on. I can show you here. Your listeners won't see them, but...

Simon

So I'm going to explain to the listeners what I'm looking at on the screen. A newspaper from Finistere in 18 – what was that ?

Kristen

1880

Simon

These are files of...

Kristen

These are, I found them on the net. Once I found one, I put it, I loaded it, uploaded it. So now I've got my own stock of Breton sources.

Simon

Right. So these are newspapers that have been digitised by ...

Kristen

By, it depends, by "Les Archives du Finistere", yeah, "les archives departementales". In every French department you've got an "archive".



Simon

An archive

Kristen

Locally in Finistere that was in February 1885, and

Simon

It's all in Breton.

Kristen

It's all in Breton. That's French. But mainly in Breton

Simon

So in the same page, it's mostly Breton, and there's a few articles in French. So we're looking at a poster here, which was a leaflet that was distributed to schools in...

Kristen

It was not distributed. It was on the walls

Simon

It was on the walls from 1900 to

Kristen

'Til 1950-60

Simon

And would you like to read us what this says?

Kristen

Aux eleves des ecoles,

Simon

Pupils of the school

Kristen

Il est defendu

Simon

It is disallowed

Kristen

Premierement, de parler Breton, et de cracher par terre



Simon

To speak Breton, and to spit on the floor

Kristen

Deuxièmement, de mouiller ses doigts dans sa bouche, pour tourner les pages des livres des cahiers

Simon

To lick your finger to turn the pages of your book

Kristen

Troisièmement, d'introduire dans son oreille le bout de sa plume....

Simon

To stick your pencil in your ear. Okay, with that first one, they talk about, you know, it's not allowed to speak Breton or to spit on the floor. I mean, that's...

Kristen

C'est raciste ! It's racist

Simon

It's quite extraordinary, isn't it ? And that went right on until the 50's ?

Kristen

Yeah

Simon

That is really quite extraordinary

Kristen

But you can't imagine... at the same time there was a very popular, um, *personnage* in France for children. It was Bécassine, maybe you've heard about it. They made a film about it. It's the story of a young peasant coming from the country in lower Brittany to Paris. She's nice, but she's a bit stupid, and if you read it... that was very well known all over France. And if you look at the pictures, she's the only character with no mouth.

Simon

Right, right. So she doesn't speak. So this is a systematic political decision to destroy the language.

Kristen

And it goes on. It goes on.

Simon

Yeah. Okay. So when do you think it's going to be finished, Kristen?

Kristen

Three or four more years.

Simon

Three or four more years, ok. And you're going to...

Kristen

When I say finish – it's never finished, because there are new words forged every day. But I mean, I think in three or four more years I'll be able to tell people, 'Look ! Have a look at this'. And it will be free on the web

Simon

Okay, why did you begin this, apart from accident, was there something else?

Kristen

Well, because I love the language, and I've always been interested in programming as well, in computing. So, put the two together.

Simon

Great. Well, we're looking forward to seeing that. Those of us who are still struggling with French, will struggle with Breton. But it is the native language, so it's certainly really useful to know that somebody's out there fighting its corner

Kristen

Yeah, well there are three mainschool systems, Breton school systems. Well, you can learn Breton in some places in French in state schools, but it's only half time at best, at the very best, and the same in the private schools. And now, recently, the state council decided that it was against the law the way Diwan teaches Breton, and the way it teaches is - there's no more Diwan if they don't use this way. They are trying to kill....

Simon

Oh, that's very interesting. Do you know roughly how many Breton speakers there are?

Kristen

There are roughly, a bit over 200,000.

Simon

In a population of... ?



Kristen

Five million. The number itself doesn't mean anything, because what you have to see is the number of Breton speakers going down this way, but at the same time, the number of educated, in their language. Because let's say 50 years ago, we still had maybe one million, or well, 600,000 Breton speakers. But most of them couldn't write nor read it. Now with the fewer but the more educated... as French, just as any language, Breton needs to forge new words.

Simon

Thank you very much for talking to us

Kristen

You're very welcome.

Simon

It's been very interesting.

Kristen

Kenavo

Simon

Kenavo