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# Endangered language maintenance and social networks

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Intergenerational transmission is seen by sociolinguists such as Fishman (1991) and Romaine (2002) as key to revitalising endangered languages, but relatively few studies investigate the processes of how it ceases (exceptions are Lyon 1991; Bankston and Henry 1998; Ferrer 2004). Yet why some people maintain their ancestral language and transmit it to their children, while others give it up, is a major issue in researching how best to support and revitalise endangered languages. In this paper I examine obstacles to intergenerational transmission, both attitudinal and physical (e.g. the evacuation of children), and factors which might support language maintenance, with specific reference to Guernesiais, the endangered indigenous language of Guernsey, Channel Islands.

Guernsey is a small island in the English Channel, about 130 km from Weymouth, the nearest British port, but only approximately 32 km from Carteret, the nearest French port. However, politically the Channel Islands are semi-autonomous dependencies of the British Crown (Ogier 2005).

At present the majority of people in Guernsey speak English as their first (and in many cases their only) language. Each Channel Island has, or had, its own variety of Norman French, although only those of Jersey, Guernsey, and Sark are still spoken. For much of its history Guernesiais was in a diglossic relationship with standard French, and was often perceived as corrupt French. It has become a tenet of language revivalists that Guernesiais should be constructed not as a dialect of standard French but as an offshoot of Norman, an older branch of the *oïl* family of northern France. It is claimed 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.

The data drawn on in this paper comes mainly from interviews and questionnaires carried out in 2001-2, and subsequent research which is still ongoing. Baseline data was collected using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews on the extent to which the indigenous language is being used and passed on, as well as on *how* it is used: in what contexts, with whom, and how often. Ethnographic methods enabled the above questions to be extended to *why*; responses shed light on the processes of language shift and the cessation of intergenerational transmission.

## 2. INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION

In the 2001 census (the first to ask a language question), 1327 people reported speaking Guernesiais fluently: 2.22% of the population of nearly 60,000 (States of

Guernsey, 2002). Of the fluent speakers, 70.4% (934) were over the age of 64 in 2001. Only 31 people under the age of 20 were reported as speaking Guernesiais fluently. There are thus now very few children learning Guernesiais in the home, although 114 reported speaking ‘some’ and a total of 283 under-20s reported understanding some Guernesiais.

Among my research informants, there is general recognition of Fishman’s (1991) contention that intergenerational transmission is the key to language survival, but also that it is unlikely that Guernesiais will regain this:

‘Guernsey French can only survive if parents and children use it in the home. I regret that it’s probably too far gone for community use to recover.’ (QGE42)

‘Unless you speak it at home and the family speak it, I think you’ve got a bit of a tussle on your hands.’ (GE20a)

One informant was more optimistic, however:

‘As long as people speak it in their own families it won’t die out – I know so many who do now, among themselves as adults and with children ... I would be surprised if it dies out.’ (AQ87)

Most older respondents expressed regret at the decline of Guernesiais, but it could be argued that they themselves contributed to it by not teaching it to their children. Some claim that they did not realise at the time that if they did not, the language would die out. Several professed not to know quite how it happened; one couple told me that their son had spoken Guernesiais until the death of his grandfather, who was virtually monolingual in Guernesiais; afterwards he never spoke it again. Others stressed the lack of economic opportunities for monolingual Guernesiais speakers; this, along with unhappy experiences at school, led parents to encourage children to speak English. Some respondents now regret succumbing to such attitudes:

‘My parents’ generation were ashamed of Guernsey French. My parents’ first language is Guernesiais. They wanted the children to speak English when they were young but now they will only speak Guernesiais.’ (GF23)

‘You see I’m sort of saying about children learning it at school but in a way I’m just as guilty as everyone else because both my children neither of them can speak; my daughter can now – but you know my son can’t – he understands a few words.’ (GF34)

Some of the younger generation blame their parents for not speaking Guernesiais to them, but parents claim that children refused to learn:

‘My daughter blames me for not speaking patois ... but she made no effort to reply when I spoke to her in it.’ (GF27)

A mother and son interviewed together became quite heated:

‘You didn’t teach it to me!’ (QGF35a)

‘You didn’t want to learn it!’ (QGF35b)

The mother claimed the son didn’t want to learn it, while he now wishes that he was fluent and blames her for not teaching it to him. He is trying to teach a little to his own children, but finds it difficult without knowledge or teaching materials.

Families were split attitudinally: one mother described how one of her sons kept up Guernesiais but another would say ‘what’s that rubbish you’re speaking?’

One respondent in his 40s recognised his own role in the cessation of intergenerational transmission:

‘As a teenager I rejected the microcosmic culture that my parents represented – the baby went out with the bathwater ... my rebellion included despising Guernsey French – “it’s so Guernsey”.’ (GF33)

To maintain intergenerational transmission, commitment was needed as well as emotional attachment to the language, to counter negative attitudes and the common conviction that speaking Guernesiais would impede educational achievement:

GF39 When I was little it was the first language that I learnt and my mother took a lot of stick for allowing me

JS Why was that?

GF39 It was because – I think it was early 50s, the war was over and so on and it wasn’t fashionable at the time

JS So who was giving her the stick?

GF39 Oh a lot of the other mothers: ‘oh gosh you know you’re letting her speak patois and when she goes to school she won’t be able to learn – she’ll be a dunce’ and all the rest of it.

*[name] a savait pas enne parole d’angllais quënd a fait l’ecole - ma grand’mère et ma mère et mon père étaient tou guernesiais étaient terjous en guernesiais – et pis quënd a fait l’école maeme i dit ah but it’s holding her back – auchet’haere – at that age the seed of doubt is planted euh lé dout mange che fut fait. (GF11)*

(‘[name] she didn’t know a word of English when she started school – my grandmother and my mother were all Guernesiais, were always in Guernesiais – and then when she started school

they said ah but it's holding her back – now – at that age the seed of doubt is planted er doubt eats [the damage] was done.’)

*Les effeints [...] ne savaient pas l'angllais quënd i commenchaient l'ecole nitout – i l'apprînrent à l'ecole – – pasqué eum m'n haoume me disait, si nous n'les elerve pas en guernesiais et s'i commenchent à devisai l'angllais, jomais i n'saïraient pas et i voulait qu'i saïssent lé guernesais, et pour chena nou-z elervit les quate en guernesiais. (GF24)<sup>1</sup>*

(‘The children ... didn't know English when they started school either – they learnt it at school – – because um my husband said, if we don't raise them in Guernesiais and if they start to speak English, they'll never know and he wanted them to know Guernesiais, and for that reason we raised the four in Guernesiais.’)

Even then the attempt is not necessarily successful – one of the children referred to has expressed a lack of sufficient confidence in his proficiency to raise his own children in Guernesiais, although he is strongly committed to language revitalisation.

When Guernesiais speakers marry non-speakers, English tends to become the family language, to avoid a situation where one parent feels left out of the conversation. Guernesiais speakers understandably felt they did not want their spouse to feel left out of what they were talking about with the children.

*Quänd j'étais mariäi ma faumme a pouvait comprendre le guernesiais mais a ne pouvait pas le devisai pasqu'a ne savait pas hardi bian – comme chena nou n'a pas devisai à mes effeints en guernesiais – j'ai daoux garçons et i n'peuvent pas d'visai en guernesiais. Ch'est chena – ch'est piti mais ch'est aen langage p'tête qui s'en va mourer. (GF36)*

(‘When I got married my wife she could understand Guernesiais but she couldn't speak it because she didn't know how to very well – so we didn't speak to my children in Guernesiais – I've got two boys and they can't speak in Guernesiais. That's it – it's a pity but it's a language which might die out.’)

‘I didn't speak it with my children – I know I'm contradicting myself, but it was difficult without someone else as my husband didn't speak it.’ (QGF33)

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<sup>1</sup> Guernesiais does not have a standard spelling. Transcriptions in this paper use a modified version of De Garis, Marie. 1982. *Dictiounnaire Angllais - Guernésiais* 2nd edition. Chichester: Philimore. This orthography emphasises similarity to French at the expense of phonological accuracy.

Numerous older informants mentioned that their children had married English speakers; only rarely were the children brought up bilingual. Only two informants had learnt Guernesiais to speak it with spouses, while one had a husband who was learning.

### *2.1. Physical barriers to transmission*

It has not been uncommon for speakers of endangered languages around the world to be forcibly prevented from transmitting their language, most commonly through removal of the children to boarding schools (e.g. speakers of native American languages and Ainu speakers in Japan). Guernesiais speakers have not suffered such overt oppression, but during the Second World War, just before the Germans occupied the island, half the population was evacuated to Britain, including nearly all the children. Some went with one or both parents, while many were unaccompanied or with schools. This is commonly seen as the final nail in the coffin of Guernesiais, effectively stopping intergenerational transmission of Guernesiais.

I can think of several people who went away during the war who understand every word of it but have never spoken it, even when they came back – and their parents did, but they didn't, and so you know I think that was what well I mean it's not dead by any means but that was a major factor in its decrease. (GF39)

The extent of the evacuation's influence is debatable, however, since language shift is such a common phenomenon. The neighbouring island of Jersey was also occupied, but a much smaller proportion of the population was evacuated (Bunting 1995); yet Jersey Norman French (Jèrriais) is now similarly endangered. One informant placed the start of shift earlier, at the First World War, as 'men went away and did not speak the language for years'. The First World War was similarly identified as a factor in Breton language shift by Kuter (1989: 80); however, language shift, immigration from the UK, and negative attitudes towards Guernesiais are documented from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Inglis 1835; Anon. 1845; Crossan 2007)

Most respondents denied that the evacuation had affected their language use, but some comments were revealing, e.g. 'I did not forget it but my children stopped speaking it; I wanted them to socialise with others' (GF1). Three times as many non-speakers as speakers admitted that evacuation had affected their language use.<sup>2</sup>

Several interviewees suggested that the older a person was on evacuation, the more likely they were to remember Guernesiais, as their language development was complete; this was confirmed by questionnaire responses. One informant showed some awareness of psycholinguistics: 'My vocabulary was frozen at an 11-year-old level.' The effects of evacuation on language use are thus not simple.

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<sup>2</sup> The status of 'speaker' or 'non-speaker' reflects respondents' own evaluation of their language proficiency; 'non-speakers' includes some who have lost the use of Guernesiais.

Some speakers point out that they or relatives can still speak Guernesiais fluently after considerably longer periods away (a similar comment is relayed by Hill 2000); but the evacuees had no idea when, if ever, they would return, no contact with home, and Britain in 1940 was intensely paranoid and suspicious of strangers speaking an incomprehensible language with many /tʃ/ sounds, so evacuees felt under strong pressure to assimilate: several reported adopting regional British accents. They also experienced a literally less insular worldview, and when they returned were felt by others to ‘give themselves airs’.

One informant expressed gratefulness that her mother made a conscious decision to maintain Guernesiais:

‘Mother, bless her, decided that the children would carry on speaking Guernsey French during the occupation ... people said it would drive the children mad but I’m grateful.’ (QGF42)

Returning evacuees who wanted to speak Guernesiais did not always find it easy. Some non-evacuees objected to returnees’ ‘Anglicised twang’ in Guernesiais. Numerous informants have recounted how mistakes were not tolerated among children deemed to be native speakers, so confidence and motivation to speak Guernesiais were undermined. At the same time, attitudes towards Guernesiais were at their most negative in the post-war culture of modernisation.

### 3. LANGUAGE LOSS

Attrition is perceived as a problem by many informants. Seventeen of 26 respondents whose first language was Guernesiais reported speaking Guernesiais less well than when younger, plus half of the ten who were bilingual from infancy. Only eight native speakers reported no attrition. Numerous informants reported being brought up to speak Guernesiais but having few or no opportunities nowadays, as the speaker base ages and interlocutors (relatives or friends) pass away. Many respondents reported becoming ‘rusty’, which several attributed to lack of interlocutors. Numerous informants interviewed in Guernesiais who did not report attrition were also observed to have problems remembering lexical items, or inserting English terms.<sup>3</sup>

*J’ai rembiyai aen amas de mes maots.* (GF28)  
 (‘I’ve forgotten a lot of my words.’)

‘I’m happy to speak it but have found that due to being married for 23 years to a non-speaking wife my Guernsey French is rusty and I have to think.’ (GF38)

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<sup>3</sup> Although the extent to which this is due to attrition is difficult to ascertain, due to the high level of lexical and structural borrowing from English in normal speech.

‘It’s difficult when you don’t speak it a lot, you’ve got to think yourself through it ... *pasque n’a pas l’chànce de palai à autchun avec la maeme làngue.*<sup>4</sup> (GF20)

(‘... because there’s no opportunity to speak to anyone with the same language.’)

‘I’ve had nobody to speak it to since my mother died in 1995’. (GF9)

Some stressed that fluency depended on interlocutor:

I’m having to think of the words now, but if I was with a native speaker we’d feed off each other (GF12).

#### 4. SOCIAL NETWORKS IN LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

The observations of Ryan (1979) and Milroy (1987) that low-prestige varieties are often surprisingly persistent contrast with the pressures which mitigate against minority language maintenance. Milroy (1987) suggests that low-status varieties are maintained through pressure exerted by informal ties of kin and friendship.

Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982: 5) distinguish between an ‘old’ type of ethnicity based on common regional background and social networks which ‘joined people through clusters of occupational, neighbourhood, familial, and political ties’, and a ‘new’ ethnicity depending ‘less upon geographic proximity and shared occupations and more upon the highlighting of key differences separating one group from another’. It could be said that language shift often accompanies a shift from the first type of ethnicity, which favours close-knit social groups, to the more mobile society which characterises the ‘new’ ethnicity and modern societies.

My baseline survey revealed a wide range of levels of use of Guernesiais, from (increasingly) isolated speakers to a community of at least 100 people in early retirement who use Guernesiais for their entire social life (e.g., whist drives, bowls). Several respondents demonstrated awareness of the need to consciously maintain their fluency, and seek/make opportunities to interact with fellow Guernesiais speakers for this reason; some men in their 60s and 70s even play football in Guernesiais (AQ31). The following respondent recounted a number of Guernesiais-language activities:

*A sésé nou s’en va jouai ès cartes – euchre – saïs-tu la gaume?  
T’as ouï la gaume euchre? Et pis demmaoiñ au saer nou va jouai à  
whist – oua chena nou fait pour des charitai.* (GF11)

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<sup>4</sup> This speaker has replaced Guernesiais *dauve* with Standard French *avec*.

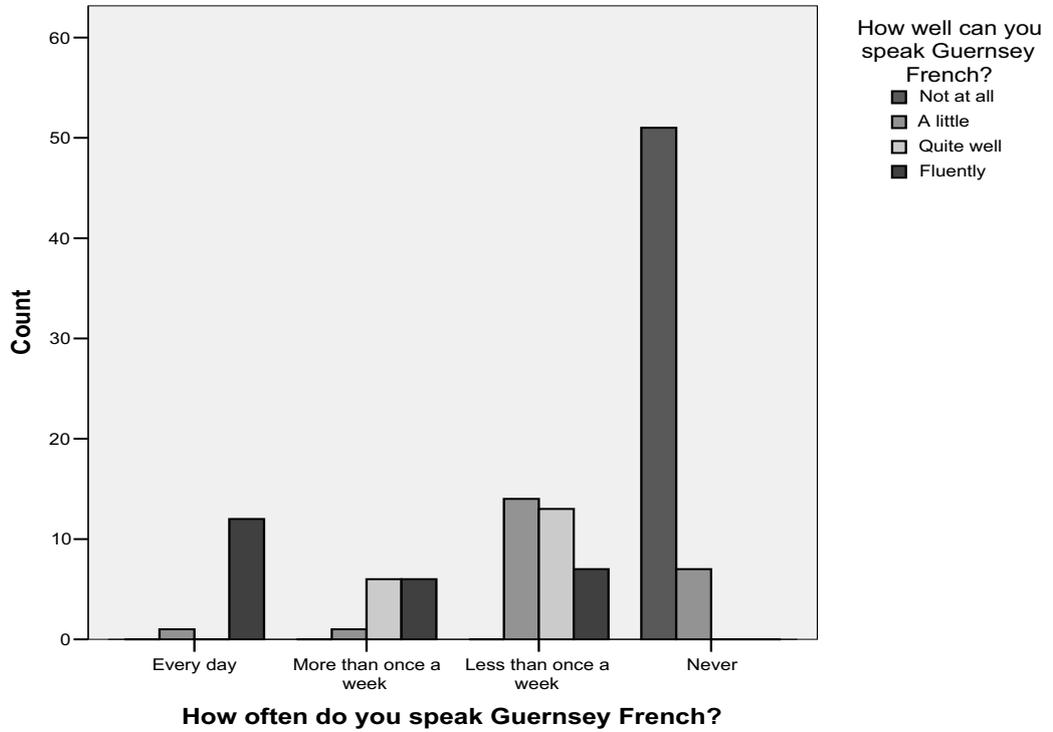
(‘This evening we’re going to play cards – euchre – do you know the game? You’ve heard of euchre? And then tomorrow evening we’re going to play whist – yes we do that for charity.’)

There are also regular language and cultural festivals, which are one of the few fora for speaking and hearing Guernesiais publicly, both by performers and among the audience. They fulfil an important social function for isolated speakers, but also increase the visibility/audibility of Guernesiais and allow speakers to express pride in it, for example through media coverage, which is important for both awareness-raising and prestige, as well as personal confidence. However, older speakers’ increasing infirmity makes it difficult to continue attending such events without support and transport and in recent years fewer older speakers have attended, so I was pleased to see the respondent who had reported having nobody to speak Guernesiais to since his mother died in 1995 taking part in a major festival in 2006.

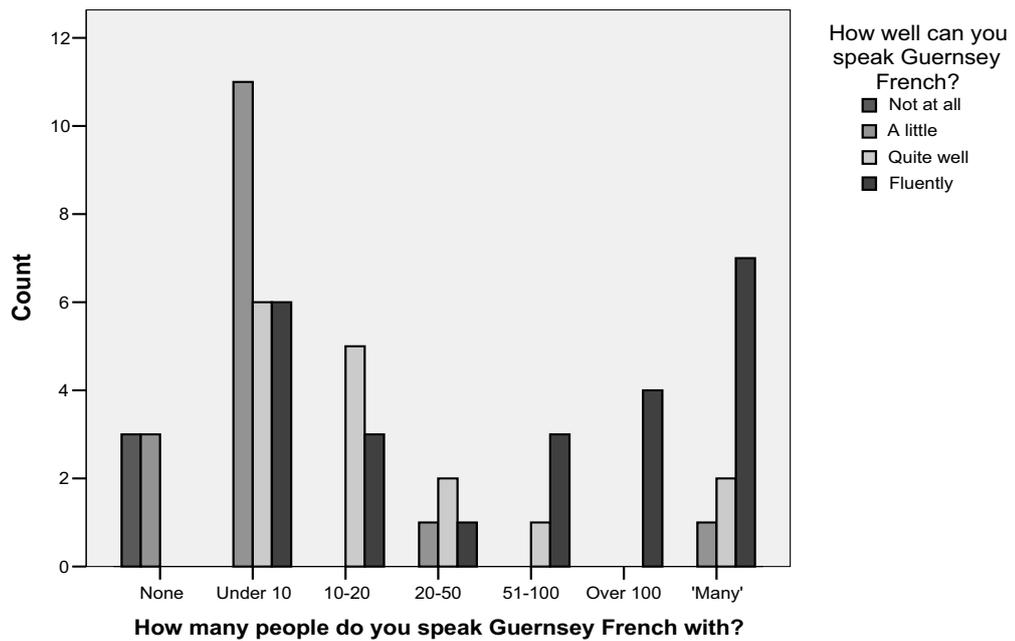
The graph in Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between proficiency in Guernesiais and frequency of speaking it. Figure 2 compares proficiency with the number of interlocutors available. It is clear from these figures that proficiency correlates with how often Guernesiais is used and with how many other speakers. The most frequent interlocutors reported by speakers were parents (when they were alive) (by 11 out of the 40 respondents who answered this question), followed by spouse (7) and friends (6), indicating a predominantly domestic domain. Only two respondents reported speaking Guernesiais with work colleagues and two with shopkeepers. The agricultural/horticultural work sphere which used to support speakers of Guernesiais has now largely disappeared.

There is a reluctance to speak Guernesiais with people who one is not sure speak it well enough to reply comfortably; the circle of active speakers thus shrinks progressively. Even in areas where ethnolinguistic vitality is highest, many speakers assume that people under 50 are unlikely to speak Guernesiais, and so are unlikely to address them in that language. Younger learners therefore find few opportunities to practise.

**Figure 1**  
Frequency of speaking cross-tabulated with ability to speak Guernesiais



**Figure 2**  
Number of interlocutors cross-tabulated with ability to speak Guernesiais



## 5. SOCIAL NETWORKS AND REVITALISATION

Lack of fluent Guernesiais-speaking interlocutors is an obstacle to language-in-education projects. The lack of fluent, trained teachers was frequently raised; and several informants observed that learners had few opportunities to practise the language. One informant reported offering to teach Guernesiais to her granddaughter, who replied, ‘Who would I speak it to?’ Several commented that the current extra-curricular classes in four primary schools are not likely to be effective, as children have little opportunity to speak Guernesiais outside class: their parents do not speak it and if their grandparents do, they do not see them often enough to become fluent. Nevertheless, some teachers report that some pupils are becoming more fluent than expected because the children are speaking Guernesiais with grandparents; having Guernesiais accepted in schools has made it respectable to speak it in the family again.

For some respondents, the affective aspect of being in a social network is an important motivational factor in being involved in a revitalisation group, which in turn reinforces their language proficiency. The following informant had lived outside the island for several years:

I’ve got back into the group of people I knew before I went away ... when we came back to Guernsey we came back in the January of 2002 – I decided sort of because I knew we were coming back, I thought I’ll enter the Eisteddfod ... and then I got drawn into the group La Gaine du Vouest ... It’s a lot of fun – when we’ve been practising a play and as a group of people we gel very well together and it’s very – we have a lot of laughs you know, it’s really good fun. (GF39)

## 6. CONCLUSION

The availability of interlocutors and social networks in an endangered language correlates strongly with fluency, for both native speakers and learners, and is a major factor in endangered language maintenance.

The traditional pattern of social networks which supported the maintenance of the indigenous language in Guernsey in its traditional phatic and domestic domains is breaking down, largely due to demographic reduction following the cessation of intergenerational transmission. The increasing age and linguistic isolation of many native speakers contributes to both individual and societal language loss. Language planning can attempt to bolster and replace traditional networks with measures designed to provide opportunities to speak (e.g. Hinton 1997; Reyhner et al. 2003). To date, however, efforts in Guernsey have not yet succeeded in doing so. However, in 2007 the government has, for the first time, committed funding to the support of the indigenous language, and at the time of writing is in the process of appointing a language support officer, part of whose remit is to ‘build up a database of people/groups involved with Guernésiais and of

Guernésiais speakers; to co-ordinate this database to pair learners with fluent speakers', i.e. to try to set up a programme along the lines of the 'Master/apprentice' schemes pioneered with Native American languages in California (Hinton 1994; 1997; Hinton and Hale 2002).

The rapid decline in the number of fluent speakers of course has implications for linguistic research; no systematic documentation of Guernesiais has yet been carried out, and it is important to record oral traditions while fluent speakers are still available. The maintenance of social networks would enable more speakers to retain their fluency, and to pass the language on to others.

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