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## THE LANGUAGE OF TRADITIONAL BRETON GAMES

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents the current state of the Breton language, as it is spoken today in Trégor (ancient bishopric of Tréguier, in the northwest of the Côtes d'Armor department of Brittany), of the most traditional games in this region such as raising the pole and Breton bowls. The article discusses technical terms, expressions evoking old beliefs and traditions, descriptions and others with touches of humour and irony.

Breton traditional games such as *Breton bowls* or *galoche* – a game using a skittle and steel pallets – are practised throughout the year. Others like pole raising and athletic games, take place on certain occasions such as “pardons” or championships.

The “pardon” is a true melting pot where traditional games have developed over centuries. It is primarily a religious festival to which worshippers come to ask forgiveness for their sins from the patron saint of the parish or the chapel. Since time immemorial the pardons have been foundations of Breton religious and social life. The religious festival consists of a mass, vespers, procession and diverse blessings. In most cases, a pardon may also include a secular festival called *adpardon* (return of the pardon) in Trégor (previously the bishopric of Treguier, now in the Lannion-Treguier region of the Côtes d'Armor) featuring numerous other attractions (merry-go-rounds and stalls in the open-air) and collective pleasures like dances and games, e.g. bowls and raising the pole.

Traditional sports games are also little havens of the Breton language. In fact learners of

Breton should be encouraged to meander around the bowling alleys and games areas during a pardon and carefully listen to conversations in Breton as they not only contain valuable terminology referring to the traditional games of Brittany, but also to numerous aspects of Breton life and culture.

Raising the pole (*Sevel ar berchenn, gwerniañ ar berchenn*)

With its diverse names in different Breton regions (*plomañ al lañsenn, gwerniañ ar berchenn, sevel ar berchenn*) raising the pole has not left many traces in history, literature, or even in popular culture. It is sometimes compared with Scottish “tossing the caber,” i.e. throwing a mast or a tree trunk up in the air, or with similar exercises practiced in the past in France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and other European countries. Although they all have one thing in common: using a tree trunk, this “tossing” activity is different from Brittany’s primitive form of raising the pole, which actually means raising the trunk of a young tree (beech, elm, ash, chestnut, alder, etc.) to a vertical

position. The tree trunk is held by the thinnest end and kept in a vertical position, without using the head, shoulder or knee for support, for several seconds. Then, the competitor, who must constantly control his pole, lets it down slowly helped by one or two people. Since 1970 the traditional wooden pole has been replaced, even in local village competitions, by a steel pole whose raised weight is marked by a slide-index.

Technical terms and language expressions related to Breton pole raising

*ar berchenn* – the pole;  
*al lost* – the low end, the thinnest end;  
*ar penn* – the top end, the thick end (literally “the head”);  
*ar gennoù* – woodsman’s metal wedges placed at the top end to make the pole heavier;  
*ar biz-red* – the measure used to mark the performance when the steel pole is used (literally, “the running finger”);  
*sevel ar berchenn* – to lift the pole;  
*gwerniañ ar berchenn* – to lift the pole;  
*dibradañ ar berchenn* – to lift the pole;  
*Glas e oar berchenn* – The pole is made of new, green wood;  
*Re bounner eo ar berchenn* – The pole is too heavy;  
*Ret e vo troc’hañ diwarni* – It must be shortened;  
*Sec’h eo ar berchenn* – The pole is made of dry wood;  
*Ret e vo plantañ gennoù* – It needs weights;  
*krog-perchenn* – pole hold – traditional technique of raising the pole on the side. It is the way banners are lifted at the beginning of the procession of the “pardon”;  
*srog-sac’h* – sack hold – raising between the legs, a most recent technique which favours the weights;  
*distokañ* – to take off;  
*aveliñ ar berchenn* – to take the pole off the ground (literally, “to give it some wind”);  
*Pa oan yaouank, ur berchenn avelet a oa ur berchenn werniet* – When I was young a pole was “given some wind”, i.e. was considered raised;  
*terriñ un ui (ur vi) gant ar* – to break an egg with a pole – raising the pole high enough;  
*berchenn* – to break an egg;  
*lostañ* – to lean the bottom end against the ground;

*Arabat lostañ* – The bottom end of the pole must not lean against the ground when it is being raised;

*saludiñ (saluer)* – to greet the spectators by raising the pole three times consecutively. This is usually performed by the winner of the match (if he is very strong) to affirm his supremacy.

Spectators’ comments

*Tu en deus met n’eus ket a bouez* – He’s got the technique but not the weight.

*N’eo ket a-walc’h kaout nerzh, ret eo kaout tu ivez* – It’s not enough to have strength, you need technique as well.

*N’eus ket diskoulm a-walc’h* – He lacks flexibility. He’s not relaxed enough.

*Ne bleg ket trawalc’h e zivhar* – He doesn’t bend his legs enough.

*Re reut eo e gein* – His back is too stiff.

*Mont a ra d’an douar ganti* – He’s gone down as far as the ground with the pole.

*Hemañ en deus kein* – This one’s got a solid back.

*Hemañ eo skañv e vragoù* – This one’s got light trousers (He hasn’t got the weight).

*Treñ a ra ar berchenn, kamm eo* – The pole is bending; it’s twisted.

*Bravoc’h eo gwelet sevel ar berchenn a grog-perchenn evit a grog-sac’h* – The pole-hold (on the side) looks better than the belly-hold (between the legs) (veteran lifters are unanimous on this point).

*Deuet eo gantañ, aet eo d’ar skrec’h* – He’s got it; it’s up!

One can also find the Breton taste for rhyme in reflections of the performers and spectators:

“*Ur berchenn avelet  
 Ur berchenn werniet*”  
 (An unstuck pole, literally winded  
 A lifted pole, literally masted)

“*Na n’on bras na tev  
 Met ar pezh a zo diouzhin ‘zo bev*”  
 (I’m neither tall nor fat  
 But everything in me is alive)

The spectators can also express their admiration:

“*Ar re-se ‘zo gwersed, paotr!*” – These are men, strong men, my boy!

Others, especially women, can express their reproof:

“*Ma n’eo ket ret bezañ sot evit en em vreviñ evel-se?*” – Don’t you have to be mad to knock yourself out like that?

Others joke:

“*Me n’am bez ket kement-se a boan o sevel ma hini vihan*” – It’s not so difficult for me to raise my little one (pole).

Expressions, nicknames:

*paotred ar berchenn* – pole boys.

Players’ titles:

*mestr* – master, *mailh* – champion, *c’hwil* – ace.

One also finds the adjectives *bras* (big) and *kreñv* (strong) attached to Christian names to form a nickname such as *Gwilh vras* (Big William) or *Fañch kreñv* (Strong Frank).

The following description illustrates the differences between raising the wooden pole and raising the steel pole. The description was made by Ifig Gravet from Caouennec, Côtes d’Armor, who was several times Brittany and Interceltic champion:

“*Ur berchenn goad n’en em ro ket evel ur berchenn houarn. Ur berchenn goad a rañkez ober daou grogad warni. Pa ‘pez savet anezhi, goude e rañkez rein ul lañsadenn all dezhi evit eeunañ anezhi, evit digeinañ. Na digeinez ket memestra. Eben, ar berchenn houarn a sikour ac’hanout un tamm. Sikour a ra ac’hanout e-pad ur c’hrogad met pa vez erru re bounner ne sikour ket ac’hanout ken. Me, ba an Oriant, en deiz all am boa kollet ar berchenn ha biskoazh n’am boa kollet ur berchenn erru ba an uhelder-se. Erru e oa ganin evelse aze ha biskoazh n’am boa gellet eeunañ anezhi. A vane marteze dek santimetr ganin ha biskoazh n’am boa gellet gounit anezhi! ‘Benn neuze e oa erru pouez, ivez!’*”

(“A wooden pole doesn’t lend itself in the same way as a steel pole. With a wooden pole you must make two strenuous movements. When you have lifted it (to a certain height), you must then make another effort to straighten yourself up with it and raise it to a vertical position. You don’t straighten yourself up in the same way. The other one, the metal pole, helps you a little. It helps you for a while but when it’s too heavy it doesn’t help anymore. When I was in Lorient<sup>1</sup> the other day, I lost the pole-raising competition, and I never before lost a pole-raising competition when I’d got

the pole to that height. It was at this height (he shows the height with his hands), and I just couldn’t get it to the vertical. I was perhaps 10 centimetres short and I just couldn’t do it. Of course, there was a lot of weight as well!”)

### The Game of Bowls (*C’hoari boullou*)

It is Brittany’s most popular game of skill, established in the middle ages. Its rules do not differ much from other European games. The game consists of rolling the bowl so as to get it as close as possible to the jack called *mestre bihan* (little master). The game was played first on sunken paths or in the village square with bowls made of local hard wood. It evolved during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century not so much in its rules, which remained relatively stable, but in its material aspects. The sunken path was replaced by a sand alley 16m to 18m long, sometimes a little longer, originally outlined with lumps of earth, today with planks of wood. In most communes play areas called *boulodromes* have been built. They contain several permanent bowling alleys which are sometimes covered. The *gaiak* bowl made of guaiacum wood replaced the local wooden bowl until the 1960s when the synthetic bowl made in Italy appeared. In certain areas of Brittany, including Trégor, a lead weight has been introduced which allows the natural turn of the hand imprinted on the bowl by the player to be accentuated.

In Trégor the game of bowls makes an integral part of social life. One cannot imagine a ‘pardon’, local fête or school fête without a game of bowls. It also remains one of the principal entertainments of the rural family at home, at the café or in the hamlet.

### Material aspects

*un alez voullou* – bowling alley;

*an toull par* – the hole used as a master for the foot;

*boullou koad* – wooden bowls;

*beuz* (box), *ivin* (yew), *onn* (ash) *tilh* (elm), *derv* (oak), *fav* (beech), *kistin* (chestnut), *gaiak* (guaiacum wood);

*boullou plastik* – synthetic bowls;

*ur mistr bihan* – jack (literally, “little master”);

<sup>1</sup> At the Interceltic Festival in Lorient (from a personal interview with Fañch Peru).

*planken an inbilioù* – a board which is often found beside the alleys and which is used to mark the points by pushing dowels into the holes;

*ur roued ler* – a leather net for carrying the bowls;

*ur sac'h lien* – a fabric bag for carrying the bowls.

During friendly matches or competitions, games are played in teams of *penn-ouzh-penn* (one to one), *daou-ha-daou* (two by two), *tri-ha-tri* (three by three) and *pevar-ha-pevar* (four by four). These teams can be arranged in advance or picked out of a hat on the spot. Usually, these teams have Breton names, e.g. *Dao dezhi* (Let's go), *Evel a gari* (As you like), *Tad ha mab* (Father and son).

In the game of *penn-ouzh-penn*, one plays with three bowls and the player who places the bowl carefully as closely as possible to the jack is also the player who forcefully knocks away the other bowls. In the doubles game, there is one player who places the ball gently (*ar c'hoarier*) and the other who uses more force to knock away the bowls (*an tenner*). In the game of threes, there are generally two players who play gently and the third one who plays more forcefully. In the fours, a team consists of the first player – *an hini a c'hoari war-lerc'h ar mestr* (He who plays after the jack); the second player – *an eil c'hoarier*; the first forceful player – *an tenner kentañ*; and the second forceful player – *an eil tenner*.

One places or puts his bowl by making it roll and not by throwing, except on a bad surface. To chase the adversary's bowl one can:

- either make one's bowl run quickly – *tennañ a ruilh* (“pull by rolling”);
- pull high, called *poquer* in the French language of Brittany, but the term also comes from the Breton *pokañ* (“to throw an object so that it stays where it falls”). In Breton, the proper expression is *tachañ, tennañ a dach*;
- reach the objective after having made one's bowl jump once or several times, which is called in different regions of Brittany *lamm Gwengamp* (Guingamp jump), *lamm gad* (hare jump), *lamm konifl* (jackrabbit jump) or *lamm lapin* (rabbit jump).

To make a ‘square’, that is to say, to chase the opponent's bowl while remaining in place to score a point, is called *ober ur c'haro*. When there is one team's bowl which triumphs over all the bowls of the opposing team, the one who has played the winning bowl receives (virtually) *ur bragoù jerenal* (the general's trousers).

When a player (or team) makes no point in a set, one says that he or she has had a *louzenn* (trousers down), which until recently gave one the right to *ur penn leue* (a calf's head). When a player (or team) makes less than three points, it is said in certain regions that he or she has got *ur wrac'h* (witch) from whence comes the *rimadell* (short rhyme):

“*Gant tri  
Eo aet ar wrac'h e-maez an ti*”

“With three points  
The witch has come out of the house”

When there is a dispute over a point, one, first of all, makes an estimation by crossing the index fingers of both hands at belt level and sizing up the bowls and the jack. If this is not sufficient, one takes the measurement with a piece of grass, straw or a measuring tape. This operation is called *butañ* in Breton. The winner of the game is called *ur mestr* or *ur mailh*.

Expressions invoking death or religious influences can often be heard during the game of bowls. When a match is finished one says *Marv eo!* (It's dead), and sometimes adds *Ar marv 'zo kriz* (Death is cruel). When a player (or a team) gains nine points (in a match up to ten points) or eleven (in a match up to twelve points) one says *Nouet eo!* (It has received extreme unction!). I know a bowls player nicknamed “Jesus” because he makes the sign of a cross while holding a bowl in his hand before he throws it during a match point. Too short a shot is called *un taol seurez* (a nun's shot).

During a game of bowls elements of superstition can also be heard; the most well-known is the *toull seizh* (the seventh hole). When a player (or team) has gained seven points, it often happens, one knows not why, that the player (or team) gets stuck there and is overtaken by the opponent – the seventh hole has a bad reputation in Breton bowls.

The game of bowls has also influenced popular tradition. Elderly people, for example, tell of the thunder which comes from the clash of the bowls on the alleys of the firmament. Sometimes, it is the elders or the ancestors, who are playing – *Emañ ar baotred kozh o c'hoari boullou* (The old ancestors are playing bowls).

Sometimes it is God, Saint Peter, and the devil who are arguing over the “little master” – *An aotrou Doue en doa gonezet peogwir e oa kouezhet boull an diaoul war an douar. An diaoul en doa kollet* [God won because the devil's bowl

(lightning) had fallen from the sky (it had passed over the top of the board at the end of the alley)].

Sometimes it is the inhabitants of neighbouring communities who are mentioned. Depending from which direction the clash of bowls comes, one can say *Klev 'ta, paotred Plouared, paotred Ploumilio, paotred Tonkedeg ... o c'hoari boullou* (Hark at the chaps from Plouaret, the chaps from Ploumilliau, the chaps from Tonquedec ... playing bowls).

Advice, reprimands, remarks are expressed in and around the alley in short phrases, e.g.

*Da droad en toull par!* – Keep your foot in the marking hole;

*Digor war an tu kleiz* – Open on the left side (The right foot in the hole, take your weight on the left foot);

*Digor war an tu dehou* – Open on the right side (The left foot in the hole, take the weight on the right foot);

*Ar plom war-benn, en tu kleiz, en tu dehou* – The lead on top, to the left, to the right (Strengthen and modify the path of the bowl). *Plom war-benn* is sometimes called *Plom nul*;

*Re hir eo* – It's too long;

*Re verr eo* – It's too short;

*Berr evel ur c'hac'her diaes* – Short like someone constipated (literally, “someone who has trouble shitting”);

*Graet eo an taol* – The point has been made;

*N'eo ket graet an taol* – The point has not been made;

*Graet eo bet en ur dremen* – It was made in passing;

*War gein ar mestr* – On the back of the master (jack);

*C'hwitet eo* – The shot is no good;

*Kostez* – On the side;

*Eeun e oa met re verr* – The shot was straight but too short;

*Aet eo da voull da bark al leur* – Your bowl has gone into the outer courtyard (far away);

*Ma vije bet ur vuoc'h 'pije tapet anezhi* – If that had been a cow you would have caught it;

*Laeret 'peus an taol* – You've stolen the point (You got the point by accident);

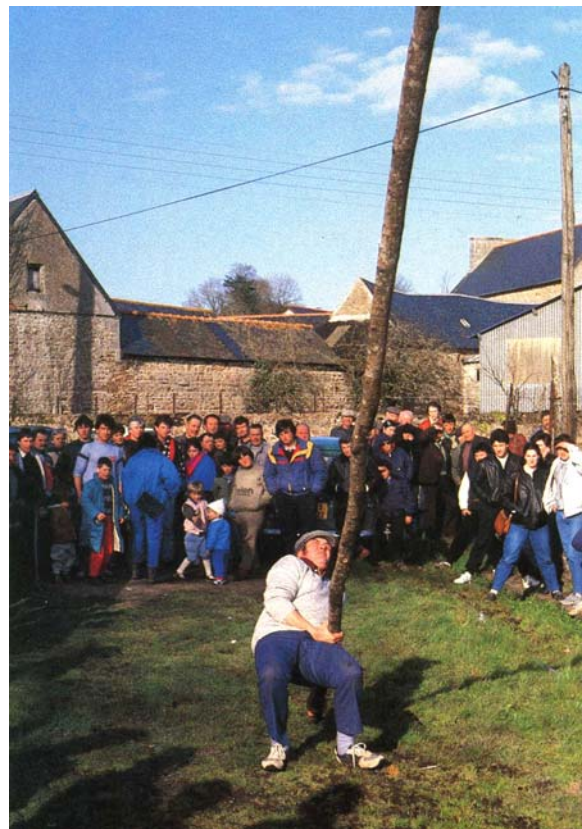
*Gwerzhet 'peus an taol* – You've sold the point (You played against your own side);

*lemlakaat* – to knock the bowl away in order to replace it by another one belonging to the same player or the same team;

*ar mestr d'ar penn* – the master to the back. When a team has its bowls at the end of the alley it can be advantageous for it to knock the jack to the back of the alley;

*Ar mestr er-maez* – the master outside. When the situation is hopeless for one team their only recourse is to cancel play by knocking the master out of the alley.

The important question remains whether the vivid and colourful language of the bowling alleys and the athletic games' fields can survive facing the progress of the French language and standard Breton in bilingual schools, which often ignores and sometimes scorns popular Breton instead of integrating it and enriching itself with its imagery and creativity. Today, some associations of young people try to promote the Breton language in public life and make efforts to integrate popular Breton into their culture, including the language of the games. Hopefully, these laudable efforts will suffice to save and protect this important part of Breton heritage.



Photograph 1. Raising the wooden pool – 1985





**Photograph 2.** Game of Breton bowls – 1985