

IB Summer Task 2022

Island Voices: How's your **endgèrbéthie**?

News

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Dr. Kit Ashton (PhD), a local born musician and ethnomusicologist, discusses his thoughts on language, identity and social wellbeing in Jersey.

Recently, I went online to order a pair of casual trainers, and it turned out there was an option to customise my new shoes with up to nine letters on each foot. Eventually, I came up with the idea of using two Jèrriais words: 'Avanchons Ensembl'ye'. This basically means 'we go forwards together', which I thought was kind of cute. For this article, I've been asked to write something about language and cultural identity in Jersey, and it's this idea of togetherness that I'd like to focus on.

For the past few years, I've had the privilege of doing in-depth doctoral research on the connections between cultural identity, language, and music in Jersey, with a special focus on our island's native language, Jèrriais. I've also been the lead singer in Jèrriais pop-folk band Badlabecques, and my PhD fieldwork took me out and about into our community, to work with all generations and all kinds of local people. So, I've seen and been involved with a lot of cultural activity, and it's been my job (literally - funded by a UK public body, the Arts and Humanities Research Council) to think as deeply as possible about what it all means and where it might go. In this short space I can't possibly summarise all the findings of my PhD thesis, but I do want to offer some thoughts and raise some significant issues, from my fairly unique perspective.

A good place to begin, I think, is to applaud the excellent initiative and positive intentions of the Island Identity Policy Development Board. I was pleased to see their interim report broadly take what is known as a 'social constructionist' approach to identity, which understands that identity is never a static 'thing' or 'essence' that we can get a fixed definition of. It is always a process, a social negotiation, an ongoing journey of who we are becoming as much as where we are coming from. So really when we talk about identity, we should talk about identifications - the actions of identity - affinities, attachments, commonalities and connections. And of course, the opposite: the disconnections and detachments of Othering and difference. Given this, it is important to understand the role of power dynamics in social relations, which is why I was also pleased to see a deliberately inclusive stance in the IIPDB's report, embracing the enriching contribution of immigrant communities (particularly the Portuguese community), rather than seeking an exclusionary and divisive ethnonationalist agenda.

So why is it so important for us to think about Jersey's cultural identity, and what role does language play? Well, to quote the IIPDB's report "there is a widely felt sense that something is being lost". Jersey's distinct identity as a small island society has been in free-fall for quite some time now, mostly via anglicisation and the homogenising effects of modern consumerism and market forces. Thus, there is a need to proactively "protect, preserve and strengthen the uniqueness of Jersey". The motive for doing this is not just economic, e.g. for the sake of tourism, or to "change the narrative" that Jersey is a tax haven. Most fundamentally, what is at stake here is our very social fabric, that which knits us together as a diverse community. A secure and confident common cultural identity can help underpin social cohesion, conviviality (different groups living side by side), and collective wellbeing. Language, of course, plays a fundamental role in all of this because our languages frame our world view, how we relate to each other, how we come to know and understand things, our everyday ideologies and identities, even our very consciousness and sense of reality. Indeed, it is largely through language that we create and enact our social reality (this is known as performativity), so the choices we make and the public policies we adopt will have a significant impact on our future.

For example, back in the 1920s, Jèrriais was literally beaten out of my grandmother when she went to school in St. Ouen. Our native tongue – along with hundreds of years of rich heritage, literature, poetry, song, and cultural practice, which provided a unique way of being in the world – was derided as a 'useless' and 'barbarous' language of 'peasants' and 'country bumpkins'. This mentality was deliberately propagated from the 1800s onwards by wealthy English immigrants and the ambitious local establishment they colluded with, both of whom had a vested legal and economic interest in anglicising Jersey. This form of cultural and ideological superiority and domination is known as coloniality (as opposed to actual colonialism), and its pernicious effects are still reverberating in Jersey today. From its inception, our school system was (tragically) modelled on the UK in the name of 'progress', excluding Jèrriais out of sheer ignorance and arrogance. It is a profound indictment of this system that a century of compulsory education in Jersey turned a trilingual population (English, French, Jèrriais) into a broadly monolingual one (unless you're lucky enough to be of mixed heritage perhaps). Sadly, I, along with more or less every child born in Jersey in the post-Occupation period, have been dispossessed of my rightful cultural inheritance. So, I've had to learn French and Jèrriais as second languages, missing out on the fluency, nuance, and shared understanding that should come naturally to me. And we've all missed out on the cultural enrichment and sense of belonging and identity that locals, immigrants, and visitors alike could have enjoyed over the years, through our unique and precious language.

But it isn't too late for Jèrriais, as endangered as it may be, and indeed the current revitalisation programme offers an exciting opportunity for our native language to make a profound contribution to Jersey identity, community, and social cohesion. This movement is now being led by L'Office du Jèrriais and the current government language policy (in a very laudable reversal of the Jersey government's historic failures), but it is also community-wide, with many grass-roots elements. Perhaps most encouragingly, Jèrriais is something I've seen shared and enjoyed by a diverse range of folks, including people not born in the island (indeed some of the best Jèrriais students are Portuguese speakers, because of the shared Latin roots). So, the reasons to revitalise Jèrriais go far beyond its intrinsic value as intangible cultural heritage, its scientific value for academics, and its economic value as something that can boost tourism, local business branding, and the 'soft power' of our unique international reputation. Its most profound value is held in its constructive, performative potential for our local community: it is a powerful way of building togetherness, as

something we can all positively engage with to express and enact our connection with Jersey. Jèrriais is for everyone, whether you and your family have been here five minutes or five centuries. It offers us a way of being both cosmopolitan and connected – of having community with conviviality. This shared connection and familiarity can be achieved by increasing our everyday use of Jèrriais in simple ways. Whether that's through common greetings and friendly phrases, group singing such as sports team chants and music events (like Badlabecques gigs!), or perhaps via more traditional occasions like La Faîs'sie d'Cidre or Lé Nièr Beurre (Black Butter). There are so many ways to weave more Jèrriais into our lives. And here's a more conceptual possibility...

Modern Western health policy has typically focussed on physical health, with recent years seeing an improvement in addressing mental health, but the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the social nature of public health, and thus the need to embrace a relational and community model of care as a vital part of health and wellbeing. Isolated people are generally more vulnerable in many ways, and contemporary society's emphasis on individualism often impedes our sense of connectedness, mutual support, and belonging. Jersey is a unique social and cultural context, but the development of a more empathetic society could take inspiration from other cultural contexts and concepts, particularly notions such as 'whānau' in Maori culture (Aoteroa/New Zealand) and 'ubuntu' in southern African cultures.

To summarise in brief (without doing proper justice to these terms, of course), Māori culture understands health and wellbeing as an interrelation between four aspects: spiritual health (wairua), mental health (hinengaro), physical health (tinana), and whānau. Whānau can be understood as incorporating your family, extended family network, and social connectedness. This is not a passive thing, but is achieved through an active process of whakawhanaungatanga (building relationships and connectedness), which basically refers to doing meaningful things together to establish, enact, and maintain empathetic whānau. These four dimensions of health and wellbeing are fundamentally interconnected and mutually dependent, requiring balance.

Ubuntu is a concept that is found across several Nguni-speaking cultures in southern Africa. It is in some ways similar to whānau, or whakawhanaungatanga, in that it refers to a profoundly relational model of subjectivity, emphasising compassionate, empathetic, communal relations. The word itself forms part of the Zulu phrase "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", which translates as 'a person is a person through other people'. We are a relational, empathetic species, and indeed language and creative artmaking are two of the most ancient and profound ways that we enact and explore this aspect of our shared humanity.

My Jèrriais mentor, François Le Maistre, and I recently came up with a neologism to propose a similar concept to whānau and ubuntu in Jèrriais. 'Eune dgèrbe' is a sheaf of wheat that is bound together, and 'dgèrbéthie' is the binding process. So, 'endgèrbéthie' (pronounced like on-JAIR-beh-thee) can mean 'that which binds us together all around'. Whether we use this new word or others, finding ways to develop and promote this concept of active togetherness, and do things (festivals, food, music, community gardening etc) that can link our native language to a process of nurturing

empathy, community, belonging - and endgèrbéthie - could be a positive way forwards for Jersey. We can also weave it into initiatives already going on, and connect activities together.

However, for all this optimism, there is also a danger here. One of the most striking comments in my ethnographic research came from a nine-year-old child at D'Auvergne school. We had been learning the song 'Man Bieau P'tit Jèrri' (also known as 'Beautiful Jersey'), and in one of our classes together, out of the blue this student put their hand up and declared, "My cousin said Jèrriais is for the posh people". It is hard to know exactly what was behind that statement. But given D'Auvergne's catchment area in St. Helier, the chances are the child and their cousin are from a working class background, and perhaps some folks have begun to associate Jèrriais with people who have the time, the resources, and the inclination to engage in heritage activities. To put it frankly, if families are struggling financially, perhaps working long hours on less than a living wage to pay high rents and cope with the spiralling cost of living, how much time and energy have they got to care about cultural identity, linguistic heritage, or a sense of belonging and community? Many are barely keeping their heads above water. Also, a good number of our young people go off to university, but the housing crisis and economic prospects of returning are not attractive, no matter how strong their cultural identity may be. If the beneficiaries of our cultural and creative strategies as an island end up just being financially established White middle/upper class locals then that would be a profound failure and betrayal of the very values this current consultation on identity seeks to promote – social cohesion and wellbeing for all, sense of community and belonging, et cetera. So, there are challenging political, economic, and practical dimensions to our questions of identity, language, and culture. We cannot separate out these intersectional dynamics or pretend they don't exist. Indeed, as the climate crisis looms it is worth remembering that the current global cultural, economic, and ecological threats we face all essentially have the same ideological cause: coloniality. There is much work to do, and our community needs to be as strong, resilient, responsive, and cohesive as possible for the years ahead. Language matters because through it we shape our world.

On that note, it is important to emphasise the value of Jèrriais whatever your political persuasion may be. It should not become a political football, or the sole domain of the left, right, or whatever position people may take. Indeed, there are genuinely conservative and progressive aspects to revitalising our traditional language for the sake of building community. What we need is dialogue and collaboration (which should also extend to our French cousins in Normandy and beyond). Perhaps the most important thing to remember is the phrase written on my shoes, in the imperative tense: *avanchons ensembl'ye!*

Read this article.

Based on the article above please write 200-300 words on the title:

What does it mean to be human?