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ABSTRACT

A number of issues concerning revival and maintenance of the Irish language are discussed. First, it is found that public attitudes about language use in Ireland, outwardly positive toward revival of Irish usage but not carried through in mass media or education, reflect considerable ambiguity. Linguistic stewardship of the language has been substantial and effective in many areas, including publication of Old and Middle Irish texts and more contemporary creative writing, advances in lexicography and development of new terminology, and calls for more standardization of both written and oral forms. Social issues remain a source of contention, with enthusiasm for revival tempered by limited resources, lack of qualified teachers, and early parental resistance. Curriculum development has continued since the 1960s, but lack of success with instruction has been frustrating. New syllabi and more up-to-date teaching methods are in place currently. However, it will be important to maintain momentum, continue to develop needed materials, and provide motivation for students to learn Irish. Despite uncertainty about success and fear of irrelevance, the work of restoration continues, and may be boosted by demand for diversity in the expanding European political and social context. Contains 8 references. (MSE)

Some Issues Regarding Irish

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Any discussion of minority language revival or language maintenance involves a great complexity of issues, some factual, some ideological, some socio-political, many of them controversial and contestable.

In the case of Irish, this is also the situation. Years of enthusiastic effort, rational discussion, heated controversy, dedicated scholarship, great enjoyment and great disappointment, have left us as a people still alive to the ideal of language maintenance and revival and still sensitive to the real cost in human and financial terms of sustaining this effort. We exist in an ongoing ambiguity. On the one hand surveys continue to show (cf. Ó Riagáin 1993) that the public at large has a positive attitude to Irish, believing it to be a major symbol of our national identity, and require above all a positive State policy on a national level; about 70% of the population believe that Irish should be taught as a subject in all schools and 20%-30% would send their children to all-Irish schools. 70% believe all-Irish schools should be provided wherever the community realistically requests them; about 70% favour the retention of Irish as a compulsory subject to Leaving Certificate; a majority want Irish to be an essential subject of the preparation of teachers as part of a general demand that Irish be taught properly in schools. A majority also favours the more extensive use of Irish in the Dáil and Civil Service. There are also positive attitudes to Government assistance to the Gaeltacht, to Irish on radio and television and to voluntary organisations working for Irish.

Coupled with this very positive attitudinal perspective, we have, on the other hand, the reality of a minority language trying to maintain visibility in a society dominated by a major international language where newspapers, Irish, English or American, rarely carry items on Irish, where popular or scholarly publications are largely in English, where all major events on television or radio are covered in English. Popular culture for most young people is mediated through English. The power and strength of Anglo-American culture threatens to submerge the vitality of people's loyalty to a strong native cultural tradition. As part of this submersion (cf. Bord na Gaeilge, 1986a) we have a very low percentage of regular users of Irish outside the Gaeltacht: we have a declining Gaeltacht population; fewer students taking higher level courses at Leaving Certificate; an acknowledged decline in standards of Irish in the educational system; fewer students studying Irish in the universities[1] and a general policy of uncertainty and confusion. Despite seemingly unambiguous declarations of support by leading politicians, Irish is for many not a priority socio-political issue.

As citizens we live our daily lives in some awareness of this ambiguity. We try to value the role of Irishness in enriching life in a modernity which is generally English dominated. This same modernity has wrought major social disruption and dislocation, has seriously questioned traditional values and understandings and has often left a vacuum of a fractured, alienated and rootless consciousness.

It is in the context of a vacuum such as this that concepts like cultural and linguistic heritage and cultural continuity and diversity derive their force. In a European Union where administrators aiming at economic and possibly political integration promote a degree of uniformity and homogeneity, our instinct for personal independence and identity awakens again the search for our remembered past and our distinctive cultural heritage as a source of both personal and national location and identity. Mindful of the words of Whorf 'that little languages and peoples are a treasure trove of wisdom and refinement', we undertake with renewed vigour the stewardship of our past and of our language as a repository symbolic of cultural and ethnic distinctiveness. The

stewardship must however be not of an empty symbol but of something which confers pride, vitality and self-esteem both on individuals and on the nation.

How has our stewardship been? Regarding the codification and elaboration of the language much has been achieved. A vast array of Old and Middle Irish texts has been and continues to be published from the manuscripts, many with notes, glossaries and scholarly annotations. The famous grammar of Old Irish of Rudolf Thurneysen laid the foundation for the major dictionary of Old Irish of the Royal Irish Academy. Publications of the Irish Texts Society and other bodies have meant that most major texts have been made accessible to scholars and students. Since the beginning of the revival of modern literature in Irish with authors such as Peadar Ó Laoghaire and Pearse, a great number of original works of creative literature continue to issue from a small dedicated band of writers and publishers. While major figures like Ó Cadhain, Ó Ríordáin, Ó Díreáin and Mac An tSaoi overshadow the area, nevertheless contemporary authors like Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Rosenstock, Mac Annaidh, attract considerable attention. While some question the quality of some modern work, it nevertheless stands as a major addition to the traditional corpus. The major question concerning it relates to the actual number of readers which indeed is small.

Regarding the language itself, it has been well served by lexicographers ranging in the 20th century from Dineen through de Bhaldraithe to Ó Dónaill. In a recent issue of *Teangeolas* No. 32, 1993, Ó Ruairc, laments the delay in accepting the modernisation of Irish with initial opposition to the use of Roman type and also to the Official Standard (1958). He also points to a crying need for the production of a new authoritative version of the Official Standard which could be done quickly and simply by normalising further the rules of grammar.

Ó Baoill in the same issue gives his scholarly attention to the standardisation of spoken Irish in which area the main thrust is towards a lárchanúint which makes a rational choice between some variants and defines the status of others. The need for openness to revision and regular updating is also emphasised.

The important area of terminological development is now under the institutional control of the Department of Education's *Buanchoiste Téarmaíochta.* This work is vital for education courses and provides standardised terminology for subjects in schools, e.g. business and scientific terms. In all, An Gúm has so far published 15 terminological dictionaries and the work continues through the labours of a standing committee and several sub-committees.

De Bhaldraithe, the eminent scholar and lexicographer, in a short article in the same issue, comments on some recent development in the internal structures of Irish based on examples from people in Cois Fharraige and Conamara. He concludes that while some developments, e.g. English words or phrases being half Irishised or translated, indicate decline, overall they accord with traditional methods of development and are evidence of vitality and ability to deal with modern affairs. He argues that the language continues to be enriched by speakers, writers, broadcasters, journalists, scientists, craftsmen who form a strong intelligent community linked together by radio and also shortly by television. On this front, therefore, things are better than they seem.

Having touched on the linguistic aspects of planning, I will now deal with the social ones which are deemed to be even more important and are an area rife with conflict and contention. Here the real planners are the administrators, the politicians, the power elite whether political, administrative, media or ecclesiastical. The early ideological idealism of a Gaelic-speaking Ireland, brought about by compulsory immersion in the infant school, floundered on the bitterness of the Civil War, the lack of a teaching force competent in Irish, the realism of English-speaking parents who had to witness the drudgery of their children and the persistent threat of early emigration. The socio-economic conditions meant that resources were scarce while enthusiasm and conviction abounded. Teachers began to question the sense of what was being done to children in the name of language maintenance and support for their criticisms came from psychologists. The educational administrators were slow to respond, in part because their political masters were dedicated, at least in their public expressions, to the protection,

extension and revival of Irish as the national language, the first official language.

Calls by teachers and others for new approaches to syllabi and methodology went unheeded and it was only in 1960 that the formal requirement to teach all subjects in the infant classes of the National School through Irish was removed. The 1964 Commission on the Restoration of Irish proposed that the work of the schools be directed towards giving children from English-speaking homes a functional command of the language to be used in later life. The Report focused on the need for a scientific linguistic analysis of the structures of the Irish language and also on the need to devise a progressive and carefully graded course of instruction. While it admitted that much of the good language work done in the schools was wasted because it was not backed up outside the schools, it pointed to the over-emphasis on the written as against the spoken language as the greatest weakness within the schools themselves.

The scientific analysis gave rise to Buntús Gaeilge which formed the basis for the Nua-Chúrsaí Comhrá which were implemented in the curriculum of 1971. The methodology adopted was the audio-visual one which was based on the behaviourist stimulus response, pattern-drilling acquisition theory which was the linguistic orthodoxy of the time. It also focused on the structure of the language rather than on the needs and interests of the children. While some success was achieved, research studies, notably those of Harris, show that from 6th and 2nd grade, the level of oral and aural competence of the pupils in relation to the stated objectives of the course is quite low. The authors of the course were obviously over-optimistic about its potential for producing oral competence.

Committees are presently devising a new syllabus for Primary School Irish. Its over-all thrust will be within the now fashionable communicative paradigm. It will incorporate a language awareness dimension coupled with a significant element of cultural awareness. Its primary emphasis will be oral and aural; it will be learner-centred, focusing on the needs and interests of the children and its design will fit

in with the notional-functional approach. It is essential that an adequate inservice programme is provided to initiate teachers into the theoretical background and methodological implications of this approach. It is also imperative that an exciting range of text books and materials is prepared to accompany this course and that the latest resources of modern technology should be available for use with it.

Already a new syllabus for the Junior Certificate based on the notional-functional approach is in place in the second level schools. It is essential that its implementation be monitored and reviewed and that when the new primary syllabus is available that care be taken that continuity is maintained. Already a new draft syllabus is available for Leaving Certificate at three levels within the same communicative paradigm. Again, it is vital that attention be given to continuity, inservice provision, materials production and appropriate modes of assessment. There are many problems with Irish at this level, among them the fact that fewer higher ability pupils are taking Irish at the higher level, that excessive emphasis has been placed on the written language with a concomitant neglect of oral and aural language, that a range of literary texts is set which to many students are old-fashioned, out-dated and unrelated to their life experience (cf. Ó Fathaigh, 1991). Research has shown that at this level Irish is peripheral to the experience of a great number of students. It is vital, therefore, that concern and attention is focused on motivational and interest factors.

While the schools and departments of Irish in third level institutions continue to attract students, there has been, in general, a significant drop in numbers due in part to a preoccupation among students and parents with the pragmatic concern of the job potential of particular qualifications. However, a slight change seems to have occurred in the last two years. Courses at third level will have to adapt to the more communicative orientation of the Leaving Certificate programme. Otherwise their valid preoccupation with the written language may distort the intention of the new Leaving Certificate syllabus and its orientation towards a preparation for real communicative use of the language. It is agreed that the experience of the Leaving Certificate programme by the student is crucial to future involvement as it is for

many the last ongoing structured interaction they will have with the language.

State policy continues to guarantee that every child can have access to their indigenous language through the State education system. As part of their induction into the language they are also introduced to the heritage of literature, folklore, music, songs and traditional wisdom. Irish as a core subject in the curriculum offers access to our cultural roots and understanding. Irish also has a significant constitutional and legal status. Surveys taken in recent decades indicate that a stable majority of the public are in favour of maintaining the teaching of Irish to most Irish school children. While there is also a strong attachment to the symbolic role of Irish in terms of ethnic identification as a cultural value in itself, there is a general pessimism about the future of Irish and a very weak commitment by many to actually using it.

This dichotomy between supportive attitudes, readiness to commit scarce resources to Irish, its value as a symbol and a low level of use bring us back to the tension duality and ambiguity which characterises the Irish revival movement as it does many others. Fishman (1991) refers to a neighbouring aggressive world power utilising a major world language to promote its perspective on the world. Edwards (1984) refers to the notion of 'a significant other culture' and language, the attractions of which as a world language and as a language of employment opportunity and social progress reduce the attraction of Irish as an instrument of real communication while not interfering with its value as a symbol of cultural distinctiveness. Edwards also points to the absence of a concentrated urban speech community where Irish could be at home with the forces of modernity. Both Edwards and Fishman stress the vital significance of intergeneration transmission of minority languages. It is here that the renewed interest in all-Irish schools and their significant proliferation coupled with the vitality of the all-Irish pre-school movement give grounds for optimism. Much needs to be done to create networks of parents of these children in which many facets of normal social, commercial and cultural interaction can occur through Irish.

The large number of voluntary bodies which are active in a systematic way in the promotion of Irish in the community and outside the education system also gives ground for hope. Community schemes such as Tiobraid Árann ag Labhairt, and various Éigsí and literary festivals also give strength to those who try to provide real opportunities for use of Irish. The success of Clann Lir, Coláiste na bhFiann and other colleges in fostering an enthusiastic cohort of young Irish speakers who are committed to the language calls out for replication.

The research work of Bord na Gaeilge, I.T.É., education and linguistics departments in universities and colleges, continues to provide data, analyses and information on which planning and promotion activities can be based. The promotional activities of the Bord also help to maintain the visibility of Irish and attract attention to it in the national consciousness. It may not be at the head of the socio-political agenda but any public figure who shows disrespect for it does so at his peril.

Special State support for the Gaeltacht continues to receive public approbation. Vital indigenous Gaeltacht organisations, such as Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne, Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta, Muintearas, continue to produce substantial outcomes. It is to be hoped that a properly funded and properly managed Teilifís na Gaeilge will help to bind Irish speakers and supporters of Irish together and will in some way dilute the impact of the global communications network available to Anglo-American consumerism.

Despite uncertainty of success and fear of irrelevance, the work of restoration continues apace. While many are convinced, many others work on in the twilight of confusion and sometimes despair and disappointment. Much remains to be done both in terms of research on teaching and learning and also in terms of new community initiatives and policy renewal. The call for diversity in the expanding European Union could once again ignite a new flame of conviction regarding the value of this old and rich language.

NOTE

[1] An upsurge in the numbers studying Irish at 3rd level seems to have occurred in the 1994-'95 academic year. This change is to be welcomed.

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