

Endangered languages: The case of Irish Gaelic

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Research into why some languages die and why other languages survive is an important area of linguistic and cultural research. Languages represent a culture and when the language dies, more often than not, the culture it expresses dies with it. Various factors influence language decline and the author identifies macro-variables which influence all endangered languages and micro-variables which are particular to a specific language community. However, research also suggests ways in which endangered languages may be revived and revitalised using Crystal's six steps. This paper analyses the situation of one endangered language in the context of the use of Gaelic in the British Isles, focusing on Irish Gaelic. Its conclusion is that in spite of its status as the official language of Ireland and an official EU language, Irish Gaelic is in fact in decline and must be considered as an endangered language.

KEYWORDS: Gaelic, language endangerment, globalisation, language revitalisation, language shift, linguistic determinism, linguistic relativism



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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the situation of Irish Gaelic, including both the symptoms and underlying causes of this language's endangerment. The outcomes of such a situation may either be language survival or language death. It is also important to discuss whether efforts to revitalise a language are either worthwhile or beneficial. The value of language survival is in contrast with the belief that the disappearance of languages with very few speakers may be inevitable due to globalisation. Conversely, it is widely agreed that language influences thought, identity and culture, and vice versa. As a consequence, there are strong implications to these factors when it comes to

language revitalisation. In order to discuss these issues, the paper is divided into six sections.

Section 1, the *Introduction*, includes a discussion on why languages are dying and why linguists care about the issue. Section 2, *Materials and Methods*, discusses the role of Gaelic in the British Isles and covers the linguistic impact of language endangerment and the signs to look for. Section 3, *Theoretical Background*, presents typologies of language endangerment, the link between language and cultural identity, and the cultural implications for losing a language, are presented. It also considers arguments for and against the idea that a language shapes the perception of the

world of its speakers. Section 4 applies the lessons of the theoretical background to the case of Irish Gaelic, and the discussion in section 5 examines perceptions and strategies that can be used to revive or strengthen endangered languages. Section 6 investigates how a language endangerment crisis may be addressed through the use of language documentation and revitalisation strategies. Finally, the paper ends with a conclusion of the main findings.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper focuses on Irish Gaelic, an EU official language and the official language of Ireland, used in signage, in official announcements and in broadcasting. It is also taught in schools. Nevertheless, Irish Gaelic is losing ground to English and fewer and fewer Irish citizens are using it. This paper analyses the different uses of Irish Gaelic, how intensively they are used and what influence they have on Irish working, social and cultural life.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 What is Gaelic and where is it used?

Gaelic is a Celtic language. It is the language used by the inhabitants of Britain before the Roman (54BCE) and Norman (1066CE) invasions. Driven westwards by successive waves of invasion, it is a minority language concentrated in Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, the Isle of Man, Wales and Brittany in France. It is part of the Indo-European

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family of languages but is a minority language, secondary to the use of English in the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic and the use of French in Brittany. Despite its status as a minority language, Celtic culture has a considerable influence in establishing a traditional Breton (Brittany), Celtic Irish, Celtic Scottish and Celtic British (Wales and the west of England) culture through music, writing and through the Druidic religion and traditional celebrations.

3.2 Causes and symptoms of language endangerment

To classify a language as dead is easy enough. When there is only one speaker left, one can say that the language is dead. This single speaker cannot talk to anyone in that particular language if no one is interested in learning it (Crystal, 2000, p. 11). However, it is impossible to say how many speakers are necessary to guarantee the life of a language. The presence of several people speaking that language may not be sufficient. It is necessary

to analyse individual cultural situations for each endangered language. For instance, if the population speaking one language is scattered around a large city, the chances of maintaining that ethnic language are minimal. That is, the population size of a language does not provide an accurate indicator of the situation of a language. However, it is also true that the number of speakers can be an indicator of the endangered status of a language (Crystal, 2000, p. 14). In the case of Irish Gaelic, the note published by Houses of the Oireachtas Service (2016) states that even though the number of Irish-Gaelic speakers – using the language at home – has increased, it still only represents less than 5% of the overall population. The Oireachtas is the government of Ireland, known also as the Oireachtas Éireann in Irish Gaelic. It consists of the president of Ireland and the two houses of the Irish Parliament, Dáil Éireann (lower house) and Seanad Éireann (upper house). Hence the Two Houses of the Oireachtas Service refers to the Irish Parliament.

Crystal (2000) states that comparing levels of language endangerment is rather difficult as each language is in a different situation. Factors contributing to the level of endangerment include the rate of acquisition by the children of the community, the attitude of the community to the language and the level of impact that other languages have over it. For instance, if a language is no longer learned by children as a mother

tongue, it may be considered moribund. This would indicate that a language lacks intergenerational transmission (Crystal, 2000, p. 19). In the case of Irish, Houses of the Oireachtas Service (2016) records that there is a very low number of families who raise children speaking Irish-Gaelic. Moreover, Gibbs (2002) notes that a re-occurring factor when a language is endangered is that the community shows collective doubts about the usefulness of the language. Similarly, speakers may consider that their own language is inferior to the majority language. If this is the case, speakers tend to stop using the minority language on all occasions. This attitude gets passed on to younger generations. Gibbs argues that this attitude explains why Irish Gaelic is only rarely used daily at home (Gibbs, 2002, p. 85). Furthermore, the fact that the language is official does not entail that the language is not endangered. For instance, Irish Gaelic is the first official language of the Republic of Ireland, but this status was only designated in order to revitalise the declining language (Brittain & MacKenzie, 2015, p. 437).

3.3 The linguistic impact of language endangerment

Gibbs (2002) notes that many scholars ‘mourn’ the loss of languages for various reasons. To begin with, linguistics has a scientific interest in minority languages. As many of the basic questions in linguistics are linked to the limits of human

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speech, rare languages can provide some insight on the issue. In fact, some researchers believe that all languages help towards providing ideas on the universal structural elements of language. If there are any grammatical or lexical features that are truly universal, linguists could claim that these features are hardwired in the human mind. Hence, preserving all languages is paramount in order to identify such universal features (Gibbs, 2002, p. 80).

Another area of linguistic interest on the topic of language death and language endangerment involves the desire to reconstruct ancient migration patterns through the comparison of borrowed words that may occur in unrelated languages. In both areas, the number of languages studied offers more validity to the results. Besides, losing a language means losing the knowledge of the culture and view of that particular community. For these reasons, researchers such as Elmendorf

(1981) have highlighted the issue of endangered languages to draw attention to its scale and call for an organised response.

Brittain and MacKenzie (2015) note that linguists should care when they notice cases of language shift. The reason is that language shift, where one language is replaced by another, means more than just a change of language, as the culture may also disappear. Other authors also argue that any reduction in the world’s linguistic diversity translates into an impoverishment of our heritage as a species (see Crystal, 2000; Mithun, 1998; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). For instance, Mithun (1998) argues that the loss of language diversity entails a loss of the full creative capabilities of the human mind.

3.4 Typologies of language endangerment

Grenoble and Whaley (1998) argue that endangered language situations need some type of typology, including factors such as literacy. This typology must also allow for ranking certain variables above others and it must be able to differentiate between various macro-variables. For this purpose, the authors argue for the framework suggested by Edwards (1992). In order to ascertain the vitality of a language, one must take into account the following factors: demography, sociology, linguistics, psychology, history, politics, geography, education, religion, economics and technology (Grenoble & Whaley, 1998, p. 25).

This framework covers features of an individual speech community together with features of the broader context of the language. The former are micro-variables, and the latter are macro-variables. The authors note that macro-variables are the most important in determining whether a language is under threat (Grenoble & Whaley, 1998, p. 27). This is due to the fact that macro-variables are indicative of features shared across various endangerment situations. On the other hand, micro-variables are characteristic of a particular linguistic community. With these micro-variables, one may reverse language shift. This can be done through education in the minority language.

3.5 Linguistic relativism and linguistic determinism

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that language shapes the way people think. Each language names the world in its own way. Similarly, different language structures determine how one sees and interprets the world (Kay & Kempton, 1984, p. 67). This hypothesis comes from Whorf's principle of relativity and linguistic determinism. Whorf (1940) asserts that every speaker is bound to describe the world constrained by the modes of interpretation of a particular language and argues that languages with a common origin tend to be more similar than those languages that are not related.

Different family languages will allow for a

divergent analysis of the world. This means that different languages may bring about different observations and views of the world. Linguistic determinism is an extreme form of relativism, in which language determines how speakers see the world. As a consequence, speakers are not capable of seeing the world in a different way. This would impose a strong constraint on speakers, not allowing them to be perfect bilinguals (Lucy, 1996, p. 104).

3.6 Language, multilingualism and cultural diversity

The difference in views associated with each language is what makes them all so valuable. Consequently, authors such as Lo Bianco (2010) address the importance that multilingualism has on cultural diversity. This author states that it is critical to develop language policies that support the intergenerational retention of minority languages. Globalisation is a great challenge for language diversity, but efforts to appreciate and promote human differences need awareness of the importance of multilingualism. As researchers highlight, the adoption of a majority language such as English entails that speakers are becoming more uniform culturally (Mufwene, 2007, p. 383). In the case of Irish, both Irish Gaelic and English are Indo-European languages, and hence these two languages may share ways of viewing the world. However, they come from different branches. While Irish comes from the Celtic

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branch of the family tree, English comes from the Germanic branch (Forston, 2011, p. 10).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Reversing language shift in Irish Gaelic

Irish Gaelic is a good example of a country trying to reverse the process of language shift through making it official. Even though the language has never been used as the language of parliament, the government attempted a shift from English to Irish through the National School system (Bradley, 2014, p. 539). In the early days of this policy, Irish was used as the medium of instruction in infant classes, as well as in geography, history and singing lessons for older children. However, the implementation of time dedicated to Irish was a decision taken by each parish. Later, as primary and secondary graduates noticed that there was no communicative need for Irish, it gradually stopped being used. By 1960, the Department of Education started to discourage the use of Irish in infant classes. By 2006, a government report concluded that there had been a decline of the use of Irish in schools since 1985. In this case, Irish public education did not manage to reverse language shift (Bradley, 2014, p. 540). According to

Grenoble & Whaley (1998), the importance of literacy impacts the macro-variables. In many cases, such as Irish Gaelic, literacy is implemented at a macro-level but it still may fail because of other factors.

In any case, considering all factors is necessary. For instance, Irish Gaelic is the first official language, the national language (Fishman, 1991, p. 122), but the language is still regarded as endangered. This is an anomalous case, as the displacement of Irish during and immediately after World War I has had a lasting effect. In the case of Irish Gaelic, there has been a combination of cultural, economic, politic and demographic factors that have established English as the dominant language both in urban and rural areas. It has been a combination of warfare, English-established centres of commerce, famine, emigration and legal prohibitions against Irish that have influenced its gradual shift (Fishman, 1991, p. 122).

4.2 The intersection of language, culture and identity in Irish Gaelic

Many authors, such as Hinton (1994) argue that community identity can be maintained and asserted through language. In the case of Irish Gaelic, the concern over the loss of the language, and consequently the cultural identity, was not noted until the late 19th century. At that point, the Gaelic League turned language revival into a

political issue by emphasising that Ireland's unique cultural identity should be restored. This rationale continues to this day (Bradley, 2014, p. 539). In 1938, Douglas Hyde became the first president of Ireland and he argued that the Irish language was central to Irish identity. On the other hand, he regarded English as the language of modernisation. This is a view held by various linguists. For instance, Mufwene (2007) notes that globalisation has caused dominant languages such as English to function as a lingua franca. In turn, this has affected the vitality of local vernaculars such as Irish Gaelic (Mufwene, 2007, p. 386). To quote Hyde (1892), *'The losing of it [Irish] is our greatest blow, and the sorest stroke that the rapid Anglicisation of Ireland has inflicted upon us'* (Hyde, 1892, p. 123).

The 2011 census notes that people who are able to speak Irish are 1,774,437 in a population of over four and a half million. However, this figure does not distinguish between native speakers and second language learners (Bradley, 2014, p. 539). The fact that the figure relies on self-reporting may mean that a strong emotional attachment to Irish may lead some respondents to exaggerate their proficiency.

Similarly, the feeling that the language is inextricably linked to national identity gave hope to those government officials promoting Irish education. These people believed that patriotism

would ensure the survival of Irish. However, this national identity and patriotism are not sufficient, considering that there are other markers of Irishness, such as residence in the Irish State and belonging to the Catholic Church (Bradley, 2014, p. 540). In fact, the Irish government acknowledged in the 1966 White Paper that it would not be realistic to expect English to be displaced as the majority language because of the geography of Ireland and its economic and social relations with the UK. As Edwards (2007) argues, it is not possible to bring about language shift when merely appealing to the population with abstractions like 'cultural heritage' and 'tradition' (Edwards, 2007, p. 242). In parallel, others assert that in order for children, the future generation, to be comfortable using the minority language, they should believe that it is the language to be used at home – that is, that they identify the language as the language of the family (Fishman, 1991, p. 356). Otherwise, education by itself is not sufficient as it does not have an effect on intimacy and identity. In the Irish context, it would appear that unless the cycle of learning the language as a second language is broken, students will have forgotten the Irish they learned at school by the time they come to have their own children.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Strategies for language revitalisation

Crystal (2000) argues that there are various factors that help the progress of endangered languages.

Apart from the data collection and documentation carried out by linguists, an endangered language can revive if the speakers of that language do the following, in no particular order. First, the language should be recognised as an official regional language. Second, the language should be standardised in both written and spoken form, so as to gain further prestige. Third, speakers should be using the language within the home environment. Fourth, it should have a strong presence in education, where it should be used both as a method of instruction and a language of study. Fifth, texts in the language should be out in the public domain: i.e., texts should be written and published. These texts should cover a variety of genres to spark the general public interest. Finally, speakers should increase the prestige of the language within the dominant community so the language may be spoken and written in the public domain (Crystal, 2000, p. 155-156).

In the case of Irish Gaelic, it is the official regional language of the Republic of Ireland, and one of the languages of the European Union. Its official status is incontestable. As Dorian (1993) notes, the political nature of the revival of endangered languages is unavoidable. Irish Gaelic does also have a standard form. In fact, there are numerous books on its orthography and grammar (e.g., Forbes, 1848). Crystal (2000) advocates the use of the language in the household. In the case of the Irish language, the Census of 2011 reveals that

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there are 1.77 million self-reported speakers. The question on the Census however only asked whether the respondents speak Irish, not whether they spoke it in the home environment. However, the Census also asked how often they spoke Irish, and the number who reported speaking Irish outside the classroom is a mere 77,148. In other words, the strategy to get people to use Irish Gaelic within the household has not yet been successful. However, the census reports an increase from 2006 to 2011 of 7,781 speakers using Irish Gaelic daily outside the classroom environment (Houses of the Oireachtas Service, 2016, p. 5). Similarly, the Gaeltacht Act 2012 intended to provide the public with the opportunity to play a role in the language planning process. It also attempted to promote a wide range of activities and learning opportunities for the public (Houses of the Oireachtas Service, 2016, p. 14).

The current education system promotes the inclusion of Irish Gaelic in the curriculum, as well as it being a medium of instruction. Houses of the

Oireachtas Service (2016) reports that there are 143 schools with a total of 45,184 pupils, as well as 41 secondary schools with 13,848, using Irish as a medium of instruction in Gaeltacht areas (Irish Gaelic speaking regions of the Republic of Ireland) (Houses of the Oireachtas Service, 2016, p. 15). The Education Act of 1998 recognises the role of Irish in the education system, placing the responsibility of education in Irish Gaelic directly onto the schools. A new language curriculum was implemented in 2016 allowing for schools to implement a period of immersion in Irish in infant school classes. However, schools have proved themselves incapable of engendering language revitalisation since those graduating went on to use English in their everyday lives (Bradley, 2014, p. 541). At university level, for example, apart from language courses, there are only two university courses in the country using Irish Gaelic as the medium of instruction. On the other hand, schools are producing large numbers of pupils with high levels of proficiency (Harris, 2008, p. 49). With regard to Irish Gaelic being part of the written and spoken culture, there are many who use Irish Gaelic in their daily routines by listening to Irish language broadcasts, watching Irish language shows or buying, reading, and writing books in Irish Gaelic (McCloskey, 2005, p. 84). Besides, there is a proposal under review to improve the delivery of public services in Irish Gaelic (Houses of the Oireachtas Service, 2016, p. 17). However, Bradley (2014) argues that there is

just one television channel in Irish, while the rest of channels and cyberspace are all in English.

It is agreed by most researchers that language revitalisation in Ireland has not been fully successful to date. Still, there is a public debate between those active in the language movement, and those who strongly oppose it. However, both sides agree that official efforts to support Irish have been both hypocritical and ineffective. According to McClosky (2005), both sides have shown cynicism, pessimism, and anger about the fate of the Irish language. In part, this disillusion was due to over-optimistic expectations of reviving the language quickly. The researcher also blames this pessimism and anger on the authoritarian and insular views associated with language activism in Ireland (McClosky, 2005, p. 77-78). Irish language activism was co-opted by some of the narrowest and darkest forces in twentieth century Ireland, i.e., views rendered as extremist. In other words, Irish Gaelic is being used as a symbol of a strong national identity.

Ireland has one immensely nationally important quality, patriotism. There is a belief and a delight and a willingness to exploit Irish culture, Irish political history and the beauty of the Irish landscape, rural life and architecture. All this can be exploited through the celebration of Irish history and culture expressed through the *Gaeltacht*, in Gaelic. Irish dance, music, arts, film,

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politics and culture can be expressed and ‘marketed’ to build an international life for Irish Gaelic both nationally and internationally and to some extent already is. In other words, Gaelic, its use and promulgation can be part of Ireland’s ‘soft power’.

5.2 Gaelic in Irish schools

On the community level, language endangerment can be reversed if the children are encouraged to relearn the language with the help of the surviving speakers in playing situations. Literacy programmes and mother tongue education are of course essential as well, especially if they are backed up with language attitudes such as ethnic identity awareness. The success of such programmes depends in no small measure on

national and international language policies such as official language status and linguistic human rights in general (Skuttnab-Kangas & Phillipson, 1995).

5.3 Re-organisation of government resources to promote language revival

Ó Giollagáin (2011) proposed that the existing language-support institutions be replaced by the following agencies, possibly within the existing allocated government budget.

1. *A Gaelic Community Trust* – to manage collective resources and to administer the benefits of group membership.
2. *Dáil na nGael* – a form of assembly to develop group leadership and to empower practical strategies and actions.
3. *A research and information centre* – to disseminate knowledge on best-practice and strategy.

This would allow an independent body with government support to focus on and make recommendations to place Irish Gaelic firmly in the centre of Irish cultural life and education without displacing English and other languages to facilitate international communication. I would want to advertise the importance of an identified ‘ethnic’ language as a way of promoting Irish

identity and culture internationally as an element in its soft power strategy.

5.4 Government involvement in promoting Irish Gaelic in schools

The Irish government must allocate the resources required to implement an effective, dynamic and comprehensive policy which includes the following five elements.

1. Ensure that the Irish education system facilitates native speakers, a Gaeltacht education policy must be drawn up. Historically, school teachers posted to these areas were not fluent in Irish, so they should not be sent there.
2. Increase the funding available to the Gaeltacht to enable native speakers to remain there.
3. Increase substantially the support for Gaeltacht groups to empower their members to use their native language and develop their communities. It has been suggested that children's play groups and child-minding facilities should be set up, with an increase also in the number of social events to take place in Irish. Some of these have already been implemented in Connamara and Donegal.
4. Draft policy proposals for educational provision in Gaeltacht areas to ensure that the Irish language is given significant constitutional and legislative protection by the state.

5. For the government to support parents raising their children through Irish in the Gaeltacht, being aware of the dynamics of language change and the pressure minority languages face as a result of the ever-increasing dominance of English.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the theories of the factors influencing language endangerment and revival and focused on the importance of understanding macro- and micro-variables leading to language 'ill-health', the influence of culture and identity on language survival and the applicability of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of language relativism and language determinism to the world view of language speakers, particularly in the light of the globalisation encouraging the dominance of a few 'global' languages, such as English. On the basis of these principles the paper highlighted the situation of Irish Gaelic as an endangered language. The fact that Irish Gaelic is endangered may be explained by numerous factors, in particular the dominance of English taking over as the majority language. The result has been that despite efforts by the Irish government to re-inforce the use of Irish Gaelic through official channels there are not many Irish Gaelic speakers, or more importantly, Irish Gaelic speakers do not use this language on a daily basis. There is a strong link between language and cultural identity, and as this paper has noted, this strong cultural identity may at times work against the revival of Irish Gaelic.

To sum up, the efforts to revive Irish Gaelic have not proven successful to date and the prospects for the long-term survival of the language are still unclear. What is obviously required is a new strategy to confront the challenges facing Irish and

the inadequacies of the present one. This is a common situation globally with minority languages. The existing strategies to increase the number of Irish speakers are failing, so a new imaginative and creative approach is needed.

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