Pádraig Ó Riagáin

The relationship between official national languages and regional and minority languages: Ireland

Achoimre

I gcaitheamh an naoú haois déag agus thús an fhichiú haois is i measc na n-aicmí feirmeoireachta ba bhoichte a d'fhaightí lucht labhartha na Gaeilge, go príomha, agus iad sna limistéir ab iargúlta laistigh den aicme sin. Ainneoin dinimic an mheatha, ó thaobh líon na gcainteoirí Gaeilge de, a bheith seanbhunaithe, sheol an stát nua neamhspleách straitéis leathan teanga sa bhliain 1922 atá mar fhráma polasaí go dtí an lá inniu. Bhain an stát nua Éireannach leas as a chuid údaráis d'fhonn cur leis an luach siombalach, cultúrtha agus eacnamaíoch a bhain le líofacht sa Ghaeilge. In ainneoin an polasaí sin, is mó ná riamh na brúnna agus na deacrachtaí atá roimh líonraí scaipthe lucht labhartha na Gaeilge. Níl líonraí na Gaeilge sách mór ná sách cobhsaí, mar sin, le deimhniú go labhrófaí an Ghaeilge ar bhonn leathan go leor chun an chéad glúin dhátheangach eile a dheimhniú. Teacht slán is ea athbheochan. Ba mhar sin riamh é in Éirinn ó 1922 ar aghaidh.

1. Introduction

Together with the related languages of Scottish Gaelic and Manx, Irish comprises the Goidelic group of insular Celtic languages. While it is clear that the language was brought to Ireland by sections of the Celtic peoples who migrated from mid-continental Europe, a precise date for its introduction into Ireland cannot be established. However, evidence from written records suggests that Irish was spoken on the island from at least the early centuries of the Christian era.

Until the sixteenth century, Irish was the dominant language spoken in Ireland. But at that point, the English kingdom and, as a consequence, the English language had established a foothold in the eastern region of Ireland. These political and military incursions, which continued and expanded in subsequent centuries, had profound long-term consequences for the spatial and social distribution of the two languages in Ireland.

The English monarchs gradually established control in all directions from their initial eastern base on the island. By the early part of the seventeenth century most of the old Irish aristocratic families had been dispossessed, and the English system of land tenure had been successfully established. A series of plantations beginning at this time introduced large numbers of native-born English to form a new landlord class. As the upper classes among the native Irish had most to gain from complying with the new social and political order, it was among this class that language shift to English first occurred. Towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries the upwardly mobile among the middle-classes and especially the lower middle-classes were also vulnerable to the social and economic pressures favouring language shift.

The role of the towns, as the main locations of British military and administrative influence, was also significant. Over the eighteenth century the shift to English spread through the urban network, diffusing more slowly but relentlessly into the rural hinter-

land along a general east-west axis. Fitzgerald (1985) has calculated from census data that no more than about 45% of the population was Irish-speaking by the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

The process of language shift was given further impetus in the mid-nineteenth century by the Great Famine (1845-1849) which reduced the population of Ireland by two million and a half within the space of five years. Just before the famine years, 30% of the population were Irish-speaking, mostly in western regions. This percentage, however, conceals the equally important fact that, in absolute terms, there were more Irish-speakers alive at that time than at any other point in history. The population of Ireland in 1841 was close to eight million people, of whom some two and half million were Irish speakers. By present day European standards, this was a very sizeable language community, albeit a minority in its local context.

The Great Famine had a greater impact in Irish-speaking areas than elsewhere. Most of those who died or emigrated were Irish-speakers. This not merely altered the demographic balance between the two language communities in Ireland, but the subsequent rise of large-scale emigration added a powerful new incentive to learn English.

Language shift thus continued to the point where, at the beginning of the twentieth century, no more than 3% of the population lived in core Irish-speaking districts in western coastal regions and, at most, another 3% lived in adjacent bilingual districts. The remaining Irish-speakers (12% of total population) were scattered throughout largely English-speaking communities (Ó Riagáin 1997). As a general rule, this last group learned and spoke Irish as a second language with variable degrees of fluency, while the first two groups spoke Irish as a first language.

As the linguistic shift to English entered this advanced phase, a movement for the preservation of Irish emerged (Hutchinson 1987) and became an influential element of the political independence movement in the early twentieth century. Thus, despite the well established dynamic of decline and the unpromising contemporary pattern of bilingualism, the newly independent Irish state in 1922 launched a comprehensive strategy to reverse the process of shift towards English.

2.   The objectives of Irish language policy

Although the counter-trend character of Irish language policy is clear, there has always been a good deal of confusion about the ultimate objective of the policy. It has been taken by many the past, and maybe still is by a few, to mean the displacement of English by Irish among the national population (Ó Cuív 1969, 130). However, whatever may have been the views of individual politicians or language organisations, the constitutional and legislative provisions made for Irish in the 1920s and 1930s (and since) do not suggest that anything other than the establishment of a bilingual state was ever envisaged. The first Constitution of Ireland in 1922, and all subsequent revisions, designated two official state languages - English and Irish. A half century later, the policy objective was expressed in the *White paper on the Restoration of the Irish Language* (1965) as the restoration of the Irish language "as a general medium of communi-

cation" and, most recently in 2006 as an objective "to increase on an incremental basis the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language" (The Government's *Policy Statement on Irish*, published in December 2006).

The language revival strategy formulated in the 1920s had three elements. The first was the maintenance of Irish as the spoken language in those marginal areas where it was still the community language. As these areas were among the most impoverished and remote areas in the state, this dimension of the strategy quickly took on the character of a regional economic development programme. Elsewhere the objective was revival, for Irish-speakers were only a scattered minority in an almost entirely English speaking population. Accordingly, the state looked to the educational system for an increase in the numbers of Irish-speakers in society. This was the 'Revival' part of the strategy, but it is not often enough noted that it was only part of a wider programme, which contained a substantial maintenance element as well. It can, in fact, be argued that Irish language policy since 1922 can be usefully conceived as a continuous struggle to find the most efficient, fair and politically appropriate balance between the twin objectives of maintenance and revival. Finally, both these dimensions of the strategy were serviced by a third, which was concerned with the provision of the necessary infrastructure for maintenance and revival dimensions alike (e.g. constitutional and legal status of Irish; standardisation and modernisation of the language etc.).

Although the constitutions of many European states recognize more than one official language, territorial considerations usually frame the application of these basic provisions. It is in this respect, and not in the constitutional status accorded to a minority language, that the Irish case is unusual in the international context. Despite the marked regional bias in the distribution of Irish-speakers at the time towards western areas, the Irish state did not, as happened in several other countries (e.g. Belgium, Switzerland, Spain) legislate for a language policy organised on territorial lines. That is to say, it did not designate two language regions, one Irish-speaking and the other English-speaking, within which each language would be defined as the official standard and norm. While an Irish-speaking region was defined (*The Gaeltacht*) and special measures were formulated to deal with it, Irish language policy was not only designed to meet the needs of an already existing bilingual community, but rather over most of the country *it sought to create one*. This feature gave an unique character to Irish language policy.

3.   The changing pattern of Irish-English bilingualism

Language Maintenance. In the the period between 1925 and 1956 there was a significant fall in population in all Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) districts although it has to be noted that this was a feature of Irish rural areas generally, and not just the Gaeltacht. However, despite these demographic trends the majority of core Irish-speaking areas remained stable, in linguistic terms, until the 1960s.

The small farm economy of Gaeltacht areas, in the first half of the twentieth century, supported a pattern of social networks which were very localized. The relative stability of these networks was an important factor in sustaining Irish-speaking communities. But as economic development began to percolate into rural areas in the post-1960 period, the minimum threshold population levels were no longer available in many

rural communities to support traditional activities (primary school, parish, etc.), even less so new functions e.g. post-primary education. The growth in non-agricultural employment resulted in increases in commuting to nearby towns. These changes in employment, education, shopping and recreation patterns all reflected a major transformation of social network patterns in the Gaeltacht which intensified the frequency of interactions between Irish-speakers and English-speakers. The overall effect was to diminish the possibility of maintaining Irish.

As a result, it would seem that the linguistic distinctions between the Gaeltacht and the rest of the country are weakening. "In the Gaeltacht the historical process of language shift is progressing to the point where Irish is ceasing to be a community language and becoming instead the language of particular social networks" (APC 1988, xxvi).

Language Revival. In 1926, about one eight of the total population outside of the Gaeltacht was recorded in the census as Irish-speakers. Almost all spoke Irish as a second language, they tended to be young and they resided in an English-speaking environment. Successive censuses since then have shown a steady increase in the proportion of Irish-speakers to 42% in 2006. The proportion of Irish people now claiming a competence to speak Irish is higher than the proportion of Irish-speakers recorded by the census in 1851. However, in 1851 Irish-speakers were predominantly persons who had acquired Irish as the first language in the home; their 2006 counterparts are mostly persons who have acquired Irish as a second language in school.

Furthermore, survey research conducted since 1970 (see Ó Riagáin 1997 for a more detailed discussion) would suggest that those who speak Irish as second language have mostly achieved only limited or moderate speaking skills, as measured in national language surveys (i.e. they are able to speak 'a few simple sentences' and/or negotiate 'parts of (general) conversations' in Irish). At most, only about 10% of national survey respondents claim levels of speaking ability in Irish that reach, or even approach, real native-like fluency in the language. Given the limited number of fluent Irish-speakers in Irish society, it is not surprising to find that the proportion of adults who use Irish as their first or main language about three percent. However, while speakers with limited proficiency do not generally use Irish in everyday conversation, significant numbers appear to be comfortable with Irish when the context requires a listening, or understanding, engagement. For example, about 18% of the population listen to Irish language radio programmes at least once a week, and a larger proportion (70%) watch TG4 (Irish language television) at least once a week (BCI 2004).

Two other features of the present pattern of bilingualism are significant. Spatially, the small minority of Irish-speaking families are not sufficiently numerous or concentrated to form a fully-fledged community (i.e. capable of supporting a full range of social domains) at any non-Gaeltacht location. Secondly, for a combination of reasons, many of which have more to do with the structure of the Irish educational system rather than operation of language policy *per se,* Irish-speakers are predominantly middle-class. Although the social class base of educational participation (and of Irish-speakers) has widened in recent decades, as post-primary and third level opportunities expanded, the middle-class bias persists.

4.   Strengths and weaknesses in the current structure of bilingualism

From the viewpoint of the original strategy, the present pattern has both strengths and weaknesses. Following the approach adopted by the European Commission in the "Euromosaic" report (1996), we can assess the situation in terms of 'language reproduction' (i.e inter-generational transmission of the language in the home), and 'language production' (i.e. learning the language in the school rather than the home).

Rates of language reproduction, even when Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht areas are combined, are no higher than, and probably under, five percent. This ratio of home use of Irish is approximately the same as that which obtained in the 1920s. While the evidence in this respect indicates stability rather than the expansion envisaged in Government objectives, it is nonetheless a sociolinguistic achievement that would have been inconceivable prior to the establishment of an independent state. However, while bilingualism, so measured, appears to be relatively stable, outside of the Gaeltacht only one quarter of those who grew up in Irish language homes use Irish with the same intensity in their current homes.

The maintenance of more or less stable rates of home bilingualism over recent decades is therefore due as much, if not more so, to the capacity of the schools to produce competent bilinguals rather than the capacity of the bilingual community to reproduce itself. Most Irish children learn Irish in both primary and post-primary school as a subject. However, research studies have consistently shown that the education system's capacity to produce competent bilinguals is closely related to the number of years an individual spent in school and, of course, the type of Irish language programme followed. In 1993, nearly three quarters of current users of Irish had post-primary schooling and nearly half had taken the higher level Leaving Certificate course in Irish. However, since 1980 only 10-15% of a cohort opt for the higher level courses in Irish in post-primary schools and even after thirteen years' study of the subject the speaking ability of the majority of the cohort is only moderate or, in the case of a growing minority, negligible. While the all-Irish (immersion) school sector is showing signs of a revival since 1970, it is still too small to greatly effect the national pattern.

Thus, Irish-speaking networks have been characterised by a marked degree of impermanence, openness and instability. While the class distribution of bilinguals has some elements of Hechter's (1978) cultural division of labour model, both hierarchically (middle-classes) and segmentally (public service), "no social class (or class fraction) has emerged in Ireland which uses Irish primarily rather than English, or where the use of one language as against another is a central element in the processes of class formation and class closure" (APC 1988, 37).

Nonetheless, the relationship between social class and Irish has been a contributory factor in the formation of Irish-speaking networks outside of the Gaeltacht. First, because the proportion of Irish speakers is higher than average in some middle-class groups, the likelihood of Irish being spoken within these groups is also higher. Secondly, because residential areas tend to segregate by social class, the spatial distribution of Irish-speakers in large urban areas is also, relatively speaking, more concen-

trated in middle-class areas. One of the few studies of Irish-speaking networks in urban areas found a strong relationship between the distribution of Irish language schools and socio-spatial concentrations of Irish-speakers (Ó Riagáin 1997). Furthermore, there is some evidence that Irish-speaking networks are capable, in these circumstances, of recruiting new members, especially 'novice' or 'reluctant' bilinguals. This must be set against their acknowledged inability to secure a permanent character that could ensure the reproduction of Irish speakers and absorb the bilingual output of homes and schools (APC 1988, 31)

For this reason, it has been argued (APC 1988, 26) that bilingualism was 'institutionally-based'. That is to say, some specific organisations, schools, clubs and families operate as Irish-medium institutions, although these institutional areas in their totality (education, recreation, homes, work, etc.) are not Irish-speaking. However, as institutions they appear able to survive changes in personnel, unlike Irish-speaking networks per se.

5.   Public attitudes towards Irish

One can view the history of the Irish language over the last century and a half as a struggle between two conflicting socio-economic processes. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century the economic and political incorporation of Ireland into the wider British system intensified. Language shift occurred in circumstances that created very unfavourable views of the utility of Irish among the public and the all too clearly visible evidence of decline itself added to the strength with which these views were held. These beliefs and opinions have persisted over time, but since the early part of this century the counter-process of state intervention has been cutting across this process of decline, generating its own very different mixture of positive and negative attitudes. In the post-colonial period two ideological and status systems have thus been competing for dominance, one deriving from the pre-independence British connection and the second arising from an attempt to establish an alternative based upon "Irish" ethnic identity (Tovey/Hannan/Abramson 1989). As might be expected each of these two systems accord different significance to the minority but indigenous language. The relationship between the Irish language and ethnic identity on the one hand, and perceptions of its limited value as cultural capital on the other, form two opposing attitudinal predispositions which determine attitudes towards policy. Support for Irish language is higher in many respects than the objective position of the Irish language in society would appear to justify, yet it is not high enough in regard to those policy options which could significantly alter the linguistic picture.

Public support for Irish is shown to be very positive when attitudinal questions in surveys tap into the role the Irish language is perceived to have in defining and maintaining national cultural distinctiveness. While there is a weak relationship between this dimension of the attitudinal and actual language use, its positive relationship with public support for language policies is important. Successive surveys have shown that a majority of the public support for policies to maintain Irish in the Gaeltacht, to provide Irish language services on the national television channels, to use Irish on public

notices etc., to provide state services in Irish and officials who could speak Irish, and to support the voluntary Irish language organisations. In all of these matters, there was an increase in public support between 1973 and 1993. Thus, the general population is willing to accept a considerable commitment of state resources to ensuring its continuance and even to support a considerable imposition of legal requirements to know or use Irish on certain groups within the society, such as teachers and civil servants.

For most people, it is within the education system that they have the most direct contact with Irish language policy. Not surprisingly, given the relationship between educational achievements and the qualifications needed for entry into the largely English-speaking labour market, the public are not prepared to support policies which would discriminate strongly in favour of Irish. While the policy presently in operation is supported by a large majority, this policy does no more than ensure that Irish is kept on the curriculum of all recognised schools. It does not, by and large, produce large numbers of competent bilinguals and, on the other hand, the sanctions incorporated in the policy appear unable to prevent a steady growth in the proportion of pupils who either fail the subject in state examinations or do not present for the Irish paper at all. Although about one quarter of the public would support more intensive, including immersion, programmes only a fraction of this minority is currently being accommodated. The attitudes to school Irish suggest that where such requirements directly affect respondents' own material opportunities, or those of their children, they are less easily supported.

Therefore, although a majority of the Irish public would appear to espouse some form of bilingual objective, the evidence from surveys would suggest that many of this majority seek at best to simply maintain the status of Irish in the Gaeltacht, in artistic life and within the low levels of social bilingualism now pertaining. The survey evidence would indicate that this viewpoint may now be the dominant consideration for those favouring a general bilingual objective. When taken in conjunction with the increase over the past few decades of those favouring an 'English only' objective, it would appear that the proportion holding the revival position as traditionally understood has slipped and may no longer represent the majority viewpoint (Ó Riagáin 2007).

6.   Shifts in policy support

At the policy level, a significant re-alignment has been apparent for several decades which reflects the shift in public attitudes. There has been a shift towards the maintenance pole of the overall strategy and a consequent weakening emphasis on the revival dimension. The underlying principle is tending towards one of servicing the bilingual population primarily at those locations where the most obvious concentrations of Irish-speakers occurs, i.e. where a community of speakers is presumed to already exist.

This is most clearly seen in the new policies which have received support in since 1970. An Irish language radio station has been established, followed by an Irish language television service. But the amount of Irish language material on mainstream radio and television services has been reduced.

One can see a similar development within the education system. The long-term drift from the objective of Irish language medium education for all seemed to have receded to the last line of defence in 1973, when Irish ceased to be a compulsory subject in state examinations, but was retained as a required subject on the curriculum of schools in receipt of state funds. But the pattern of recent examination results in Irish - which show a growing percentage of pupils failing or not taking the paper - together with a number of recent policy decisions suggest that this line is itself showing signs of erosion. While the government is careful to support the expanding all-Irish school movement, it has also relaxed further the requirements for pupils to study Irish and the requirements for teachers to have a professional competence in Irish. There is now a clear possiblity that Irish as a school subject will revert to its pre-independence status as a voluntary subject.

Public statements about the strategic direction of language policy are rare. As a result, each of the main agencies responsible for implementing key policies in e.g. education, the Gaeltacht and media are left in a policy vacuum and increasingly tend to act autonomously. Policies are left vulnerable to assessment solely within the context of the sponsoring agency's operational environment and without reference to any wider societal goal. The possibility that they may have a function within a national bilingual policy - irrespective of its shape - is increasingly difficult to articulate and sustain.

7.   Conclusion

A short reflection on the structural limits and inherent weakness of the present pattern of bilingualism in Ireland clearly indicates that there are major problems with both the processes of bilingual production and of bilingual reproduction.

The stability of current Irish usage is dependent on the stability of the social networks of users, that is, on the series of interlinked social relationships that may grow out of contacts in an institutional setting, but whose survival depends on the achievement of some degree of friendship, intimacy and interpersonal knowledge among participants. It seems unlikely that these are strong enough at present to guarantee the reproduction of spoken Irish, or its expansion, into the next generation.

I would argue that the focus of current Irish language policy has swung too far towards the maintenance pole of the original strategy. There are dangers in this development. Tovey (1988, 67) points out that the more policy singles out 'Irish-speakers' as the target for language policies on the grounds of their rights as a minority group, the less plausible it becomes to sustain existing policies to revive Irish. Furthermore, a policy built primarily around the provision of state services to Irish-speakers will, in my opinion, ultimately find that they do not exist in large enough numbers nor are they sufficiently concentrated to meet the operational thresholds required to make these services viable. A viable language policy for Irish has to always to aim to recruit from the ranks of those currently speaking English, rather than simply service those currently speaking Irish. Language survival, in other words, requires language revival.

8. References

Note: Unless otherwise stated, all statistics and the analysis presented here can be found in fuller detail in Ó Riagáin (1997, 2001, 2007).

APC = Advisory Planning Committee (1988): *The Irish language in a changing society: shaping the future*. Dublin: Bord na Gaeilge.

BCI = Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (2004): *Turning on and tuning in to Irish language radio in the 21st century*. Dublin: BCI.

Census 2006: Principal Demographic Results. Dublin: Central Statistics Office (CSO).

European Commission (1996): *EUROMOSAIC: The production and reproduction of the minority language groups in the European Union*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities (OOPEC).

Fitzgerald, G. (1984): Estimates for Baronies of minimum level of Irish-speaking among successive decennial cohorts: 1771-81 to 1861-71. In: *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Vol. 84, Section C, No. 3, 117-155.

Gaeltacht Commission = Commission of Inquiry into the Preservation of the Gaeltacht (1926): *Final Report*. Dublin: Stationary Office.

Hechter, M. (1978): Group formation and the cultural division of labour. In: *American Journal of Sociology* 84, 2, 293-318.

Ó Cuív, B. (ed.) (1969): *A view of the Irish language*. Dublin: Stationary Office.

Ó Riagáin, P. (1997): *Language policy and social reproduction: Ireland 1893-1993*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Ó Riagáin, P. (2001): Irish language production and reproduction 1981-1996. In Fishman, J. (ed.): *Can threatened languages be saved?* (= Multilingual Matters 116). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 195-214.

Ó Riagáin, P. (2007): Relationships between attitudes to Irish, social class, religion and national identity in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. In: *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 10, 4, 369-393.

Tovey, H. (1988): The state and the Irish language: the role of Bord na Gaeilge. In: *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 70, 53-68.

Tovey, H./Hannan, D./Abramson, H. (1989): *Why Irish? Irish identity and the Irish language*. Dublin: Bord na Gaeilge.