Late Modern Irish and the Dynamics of Language Change and Language Death

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1. Introduction

My comments are informed by the experience of the last 20-25 years, as someone who grew up in the Cois Fharraige Gaeltacht in south Conamara, and who has seen the language retreat further and further westwards and inwards as the Gaeltacht continues to dwindle. In these few years, I have also seen the last remaining pockets of Gaeltacht in areas such as Bearna, Na Forbacha, Mionlach, Leamhchoill, and Maigh Cuilinn all but disappear, never to return.

There are few things in Ireland as complicated or as controversial as the language question. We agree on very little. Be that as it may, I believe we can all agree that the form of Irish spoken today is not that of 25 years ago, for example. What passes for Irish today would not have passed for Irish 25 years ago. Others will say to me that what passed for Irish 25 years ago would not have passed for Irish in 1958 when *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil*[1] was published and so on.

Of course, this should come as no surprise to us as languages are always in a state of flux. In most cases, except in the case of contemporary Irish, as I hope to show in this paper, language change is a fairly natural and unconscious development which forms an essential part of the life cycle of any language.

Each generation creates its own version of the language it acquires from the previous generation. People frequently complain that the younger generation does

[1] *Gramadach na Gaeilge agus Litriú na Gaeilge: An Caighdeán Oifigiúil*. Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláithair.

not speak the language as proficiently as their parents' or grandparents' generation did. Thus, certain words, phrases, lingo, etc. will be used by one generation, but not by the other. The examples from contemporary Modern Irish are numerous. Everyone has his or her own favourites. I could mention the ubiquitous *é sin ráite* (based on the English *that said*, *having said that*) which has ousted the more traditional and perfectly adequate *ina dhiaidh sin féin*, *mar sin féin*, *má tá féin*, etc. Others will frown on new analogical verbal forms such as *bheadh mé* instead of the 'correct' synthetic form *bheinn* or *chaitheadh siad*, instead of *chaithidís*.

Sometimes not only will lexical elements change, develop, or be discarded, but other elements of the language such as syntax and grammar will also undergo change. Be that as it may, a foundation belonging to the older period of usage will usually remain. This foundation will contend with the newer language spoken by younger speakers. As the number of differences between the type of language spoken by the different generations increases, new usages start to develop and establish themselves alongside the traditional patterns of use.

The difference between the old and new usage may be quantified by means of ratio. Let us take for example Early Middle Irish (*c*. 875–950) where the ratio of old usage to new usage is around 70:30. We might say that Middle Irish proper had a ratio of 50:50. By the time of Late Middle Irish (*c*. 1075–1175) this has become 20:80. When the number of changes and of new usage become so great that there is a higher ratio of new usage that does NOT conform with the older usage in the contemporary language, we may say that a new period in the language has arrived. That is what happened around 1200 when the ratio of older usage (closer to Old Irish) to newer usage (closer to Modern Irish) increased to such an extent that one could no longer describe the contemporary language as Middle Irish. The compilation of the so-called Grammatical tracts was a reaction, no doubt, to the realisation on the part of the non-ecclesiastic poetic classes, that a new period dawned in the history of the language, i.e. Early Modern Irish.

2. Definition of Late Modern Irish

I should explain what I mean by the term Late Modern Irish. Another new period begins in Irish about 1700, i.e. Modern Irish or Traditional Late Modern Irish, as I prefer to call it. By Traditional Late Modern Irish, I mean that language which was not only *spoken* in the Gaeltacht by both young and old up until about the 1960s, but that was also *passed on* to the next generation. This language, while still spoken, is now mainly limited to those who are in their 50s or older. It is the language found in the *sean-nós* singing tradition of today, in the traditional storytelling tradition which died out in the 1930s, in the proverbs, pithy sayings, expressions and curses of the people, in Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré*

na Cille, or indeed in the general speech of the people as represented by the Hartmann/de Bhaldraithe research project of the early 1960s now being edited and published by Arndt Wigger.[2] The influence of English on this type of Irish is minimal and is limited to lexicon. There is little, if any, English influence on the phonology, morphology or syntax. It is as if English never existed. The same cannot be said of the type of Irish spoken today.

It is this understanding of language change that informs my contention that the language I call Traditional Late Modern Irish (i.e. Irish since *c.* 1700) is on its last legs, and that it will be extinct, for all intents and purposes, by about 2050, by which time the last speakers will all be dead. The ratio between older usage (i.e. that which conforms with Late Modern Irish) and new usage (i.e. that which does not and which is represented by what I will term Non-Traditional Late Modern Irish) is about 80:20 at the moment. As happened in the case of the change from Middle to Modern Irish, I believe the ratio will continue to change so that in another 50 years the ratio will be 20:80.

The most telling characteristic of Non-Traditional Late Modern Irish is that a monoglot speaker of Traditional Late Modern Irish would struggle to understand much of it, especially a lot of what is found in our contemporary literature. In other words, knowledge of English is a pre-requisite to the understanding of Non-Traditional Late Modern Irish. This is caused, in the main, by the unnatural influence of English phonology and syntax on the contemporary language so that much of contemporary Irish is really nothing more than an imitation of English.

While no one is immune from the influence of English, the main offenders are the media, journalists of every description, and the thousands who are learning Irish as a second language, but who do not understand that they need to learn it correctly.

3. Lexical and Syntactic Equivalence

The main characteristics of this new type of Irish manifest themselves in three areas: Phonology, Morphology and Syntax. I will confine myself to Syntax. While there is, generally speaking, a certain amount of *lexical* equivalence between any two languages, it is the difference in (or lack of) *syntactic* equivalence which distinguishes them from each other, and which makes them two distinct and different languages.

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[2] Hartmann, H., ed., 1996, *Airneán: eine Sammlung von Texten aus Carna, Co. na Gaillimhe*, Tübingen: Niemeyer; Wigger, A., ed., 2004, *Caint Ros Muc*, Dublin: Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies.

A very simple example of what I mean is seen in the common idiom, found in many languages, that expresses the universal concept that different people have different ways of doing things. In English, it is usually rendered by *When in Rome, do as the Romans do*; in German by *Andere Länder, andere Sitten*. The usual literary equivalent of this in Irish is (or used to be, at any rate) *Ní lia tír ná gnás*, i.e. 'There are more customs than there are countries'.

When we compare these three proverbs, we see that they express (more or less) the same concept. However, there is no direct lexical nor syntactic equivalence between them. Rather, the equivalence can be described as indirect. It is *indirect* as there is no similarity between the words (nor indeed the syntax) used in the phrases which express the concept.

It is more than likely that your typical speaker of Non-Traditional Late Modern Irish will be familiar with the concept contained in the above, but unfamiliar with the way Traditional Late Modern Irish expresses it. Faced as he is with this dilemna (on a daily basis) the speaker of Non-Traditional Late Modern Irish will fall back (as he always does) on his native language, English. In this, his mother tongue, the concept is embodied in the expression *When in Rome, do as the Romans do*. This is *transferred* (as opposed to *translated*) directly into Irish as something like *Nuair a bhíonn tú sa Róimh, déan ar nós na Rómhánach*. Here the equivalence is said to be direct. Needless to say, the new expression stinks of Anglicism and corrodes the linguistic integrity of the traditional language.

Other examples of the type of thing Irish is faced with are some of the following:

Time will tell	Is maith an scéalaí an aimsir	Indirect
Time will tell	Inseoidh (an t-) am	Direct
No one is perfect	Ní bhíonn saoi gan locht	Indirect
No one is perfect	Níl aon duine foirfe	Direct
Silence is golden	Is binn béal ina thost	Indirect
Silence is golden	Tá (an) ciúnas órga	Direct

What is happening therefore is that the lexical (but more alarmingly the syntactic equivalence) between the two languages is becoming more and more direct, something which is leading to the transformation of Traditional Late Modern Irish into Non-Traditional Late Modern Irish.

However, this transformation is limited not just to lexicon and syntax. It is taking its toll on Morphology, as well. The reason for this is very simple. As Eng-

lish is no longer an inflexional language, there is no equivalent in English to inflected nominal or adjectival forms (as found in the genitive or nominative plural). Nor is there any equivalent to the initial mutations (Lenition and Nasalization) found in Irish.

In terms of Phonology, we are faced with the same problem. There is no equivalent in English to the gramatical function of the palatalization of consonants to distinguish, for example, between singular and plural forms of the noun or to distinguish between 1st and 2nd sg. preterite verbal forms. This is one of the many reasons that palatal consonants are disappearing in Irish. Another reason is that the phonological system of Irish is being slowly eroded and abandoned due to its replacement by that of English. This is heard mostly in the speech of non-native speakers, but native speakers are not free from this disease either (*Gaeilge an Chlochair*).

Added to this is the suspicion that there is an unwritten policy at work in both TG4 and RTÉ NOT to use native speakers for television or radio advertisements. Much of what passes for Irish language broadcasting on TG4 and RTÉ is presented by non-native speakers who insist on pronouncing Irish with English phonology, English syntax and idiomatic conventions. The two best-known are Hector and Manchán, two of TG4's most popular 'stars'. However, the killer of all this is that people keep saying that they *love* these programmes because they can follow the Irish. That speaks volumes. If the truth be told, if these people were to speak English the way they speak Irish, they would be ridiculed and severely condemned.

In many ways, it could be argued that what is happening to Irish today is something akin to what happened to the English language in Ireland in the 19th century when it came in contact with Irish to produce Hiberno-English. The language contact which happened between Irish and English in the 19th century left its mark on three major aspects of the English language – phonology, syntax and lexicon. Similarily today, these are three of the facets of Irish which most obviously betray the influence of English.

4. The Official Languages Act and the Translation Industry

In the last few years, there has been an unprecedented increase in the amount of Irish being written both within and without Ireland. This is due, in no small part, to the Official Languages Act 2003 introduced as a sop to the Irish language movement and as part of a longer-term strategy to eventually isolate the Irish speaking community in Ireland. The act stipulates that all public bodies departments and organs of state must provide certain documents in English and in Irish.

This new development is not without its difficulties. In 1893, when *Conradh na Gaeilge* was founded, native Irish speakers made up over 90% of the Irish-speaking population with the remaining 10% coming from the rest of the population. Today, the situation is the opposite with 90% non-native speakers and 10% native. Thus, the majority of those working in the translation industry are non-native speakers. This, of course, is one of the taboos of translations studies, i.e. the translator should never translate into a target language that is not his first language. In practical terms, this means that you have people, whose grasp of the Irish language is inadequate, working as translators. However, what is happening is not translation, but imitation (*Aithris* vs. *Aistriúchán*) as all too often these translators follow the syntax and idiomatic conventions of English, thus producing what amounts to little more than English in Irish drag.

The translation industry poses a huge threat to the long term vitality of the Irish language. Translators account for the largest proportion of those writing Irish today. Never in the history of the language was so much Irish being written as today. It is difficult to say how much Irish is being written every year, but if we were only to take the annual reports which all public bodies must translate into Irish under the Official Languages Act 2003, we come out with a figure around 6,500,000 words. That is a lot of Irish and a lot of damage to the language. The reality of all of this is that the reader is faced with a type of Irish which is so poor that it has to be translated back into English to understand it. As their grasp of the language is inadequate, you will find very little understanding among most translators of correct or appropriate register. As for the concepts of localization, cultural referencing or internalization, they are as foreign to most of those working in the translation industry as a day without rain to an Irishman.

One of the most contentious areas in which Non-Traditional Late Modern Irish is to be found is in the realm of Terminology. The need for modern terminology has not been caused by the practical everyday requirements of Irish speakers, but by the demands of the translation industry. Much of the terminology being coined by terminologists in Ireland flouts some of the most basic rules of Traditional Late Modern Irish. Very often, it displays a total lack of understanding of the way the language works. The latest example I came across is the term for dental hygienist, i.e. *sláinteolaí déadach*. Now of course anyone who has heard of Fearghus Déadach or Dubhdhéadach will know that the word *déadach* means 'having teeth'.[3] So *sláinteolaí déadach* actually means a toothed hygienist. What we should expect is *sláinteolaí fiacla* with the noun *fiacail* being used

[3] Cf. DIL *sv* détach.

to form a genitive plural with adjectival force. But as this concept does not exist in English it will not be found in Irish.[4]

A further difficulty is the fact that most speakers of Irish today, be they native or non-native, have little if any knowledge of the riches of Traditional Late Modern Irish. They have never been exposed to it and probably never will either. Thus, Irish can no longer draw on the storehouse of the traditional language to form new terms. Another difficulty is that if one were actually to translate something according to the correct and traditional usage of the language, we would be confronted with the problem faced by Aodh mac Duach Dhuibh, king of Oirghialla, in the Early Modern Irish satirical text *Tromdhámh Ghuaire*, when he was forced to utter "Is maith an duan cibé do thuigfeadh í!,"[5] i.e. 'It's a great poem (*leg*. translation) if only I could understand it!'.

5. Dynamics of Language Change and Language Death

Language Contact and Language Change is nothing new. Irish is no different. Irish came into contact with whatever language(s) were spoken here when the first Q-Celts arrived in Ireland. It came into contact with British Latin, Ecclesiastic Latin, Old Welsh, Old Norse, Norman French and of course with English.

However, the contact that Irish had with English cannot be compared to any of the previous contacts. English was the only language which managed to become the dominant and prestige language and to cause 99% of the population to abandon their own language.

There are a number of other differences between the changes which happened to Irish in the past and those changes happening today. These are differences we ignore at our peril. The biggest and most significant difference is that the changes which Irish underwent in the past and which led to the transition from Old to Middle to Early and Late Modern Irish were all caused and engineered by native speakers. The change, while triggered and aided by certain external social and political developments, was not an imposed process, but an internal one. The change happening today is, for the most part (as 90% of speakers are non-native) an imposed, external process which is both unnatural and artificial.

Another major difference is that the prestige language (English) is also the world language. It is spoken by everyone in Ireland. It is both an internal and external linguistic enemy. Not only are we being bombarded with English by the

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[4] While the term *consan déadach* for a dental consonant does exist, it is perfectly acceptable as *déadach* means, in this case, 'stemming from the teeth'.

[5] Joynt (1941: l. 70-71).

international media (America & UK), but the Irish state has an unwritten policy of linguistic assimilation in place since the early 1950s. It was aided in this work by the so-called national public broadcaster RTÉ and, of course, by the Catholic Church which bears much responsibility for the spread of English in the Gaeltacht and the erosion of the indigenous language.

The other main difference between this period of change and all others is that the Irish language is at death's door. Some, like myself, would contend that the language is moribund. Many – such as Government ministers – will even attempt to (though they should not) deny that the Gaeltacht itself is doomed to die. Think of this: how can a language which needs its own official Act and its own Language Commissioner to protect it from the government of the State in which it is the first official language, not be doomed to die?

6. Lack of Exposure and Critical Mass

The greatest difficulty facing the language, however, is that the number of Irish speakers is simply too low. In 1990, the late Breandán Ó hEithir stated in a report commissioned by *Bord na Gaeilge* (which they tried to suppress and have yet to publish) that the number of native Irish speakers stood at 10,000. This figure may be a bit too pessimistic; perhaps 30,000-40,000 is nearer to the truth.

The paucity of speakers means that we lack a vibrant Irish language community in which the language could invent, in a natural and unconcious manner, the terminology needed by a modern language. This lack of critical mass is what causes the another obstacle in the growth of the language – the lack of exposure. Exposure to various and many sources is how we learn new words and phrases. The only place your average Irish speaker will learn new phrases is on Raidió Na Gaeltachta. There are not enough occasions on which to interact with other Irish speakers and thereby pick up new phrases and words. On top of this, there are not enough people who speak Irish well enough from whom you would want to learn anything. This problem of lack of exposure is further compounded by the fact that there is no tradition of reading in the Irish language among Irish speakers. The only people who read Irish are academics or writers. Native speakers of Irish do not read their own language. There is no *Bild-Zeitung* in Irish. Why?

7. Conclusion

It is generally accepted that Language Change and Language Death are by definition mutually exclusive, i.e. you cannot have both. Language Death can be caused by two things: genocide or the abandonment of a language by those who

traditionally spoke it in favour of another. The big question facing the Irish language today is whether that which is happening to the language today amounts to Language Change or Language Death. In this regard, I cannot but think of the words of T.F. O'Rahilly: "When a language surrenders itself to a foreign idiom, and when all its speakers become bilingual, the penalty is death" (O'Rahilly 1932: 121).

This is a question which has been very successfully ignored by all concerned with the Irish language, at home and abroad, especially those who earn their crust from Irish in the Universities and who should know better. A bit like the way the majority of Irish academics have said absolutely nothing about the rape of Teamhair na Rí by the thugs in the National Roads Authority with their building of the M3 motorway.

While Irish may have become more popular in the last few years, the linguistic undercurrent which permeates much of this popularity points to – in my opinion – the demise of the language as we know it. There is a linguistic dichotomy in Ireland which we are unwilling to face up to. What we fail to understand in Ireland is that a threatened language cannot survive if, on the one hand, Irish is no more than a commodity for those who have the luxury of speaking the prestige language as their first language, while on the other, the Gaeltacht – the community which supports the first language of the child – continues to die.

People point to the growth of Gaelscoileanna, TG4, etc., but I always ask myself where the tens of thousands of children who have passed through the Gaelscoileanna system since the early 1970s have disappeared.

While the number of Non-Traditional Late Modern Irish continues to rise, I ask myself why it is that Gaeltacht children must still use lazily and badly translated textbooks in school? How is it that by the age of seven a Gaeltacht child understands that English is the prestige language and that Irish is something it speaks at home with its parents? How is it that by the time a Gaeltacht child enters the second level education system, it speaks, reads and writes better English than Irish?

These questions, as well as the question of whether Non-Traditional Late Modern Irish represents Language Change or Language Death, are the hard questions we need to address in Ireland if we are to be true to ourselves and to the language we choose to speak.

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