

Does achieving the status of an Official Language make a difference to long-term viability of a previously dominated minority language?

Abstract

Bourdieu (*Language and Symbolic Power*, 1991) built his observations on state language policy around his now well-known conceptual dyad of linguistic market and linguistic habitus. Viewing the state as a major player in the linguistic market¹ he argues that when a previously dominated language achieves the status of an official language, it undergoes a revaluation which profoundly changes its users' relationship with it¹. He continues the reversal of the symbolic relations of power and of the hierarchy of the values placed on the competing values has entirely real economic and political effects¹. However, this predication is qualified by the observation that the effects of domination (in the linguistic market) are "always exerted through a whole set of specific institutions and mechanisms, of which the specifically linguistic policy of the state and even the overt interventions of pressure groups form only the most superficial aspect".

While Bourdieu's approach to linguistic phenomena can be considered original and innovative, he did not develop it in any major empirical study, such as he conducted in other fields. This paper thus attempts to critically utilise Bourdieu's theory of practice¹ in evaluating the role of the state in two contrasting situations Southern Ireland, where Irish has been an official language since 1922, and Northern Ireland, where it had no official status.

A language attitude and use survey, carried out simultaneously in Ireland, North and South, in 2001 (N=2000) provides the data for the study. The findings broadly uphold Bourdieu's nuanced prediction.

Paper proposed by:
Dr. Pádraig Ó Riagáin
Research Professor
The Linguistics Institute of Ireland
31 Fitzwilliam Place
Dublin 2