



POWER DIFFERENTIALS IN LANGUAGE PLANNING

Joe Mac Donnacha, National University of Ireland, Galway

Abstract

One of the most controversial and unresolved issues in Irish language planning for many decades has been the inability of public sector organisations to deliver their services through the medium of the Irish language to Irish speakers living in Gaeltacht areas, despite the State's clear support for the Irish language in other sectors, such as in education, and the constitutional position of Irish as the first official language of the State. As early as 1926 a Gaeltacht Commission set up by the Government of the day reported that '.....the use of English by officials throughout the Gaeltacht is tolerated without question by most of the responsible Civil Service Authorities. The fact that there are areas where, apart from the question of the National language altogether, efficient administration would demand that Irish should be the first language of officials, is ignored in the pressing importance of those aspects of administration that are most readily seen at Headquarters.' (Coimisiún na Gaeltachta, 1926:51).

Despite the Commission's recommendations and the establishment of a Government department with specific responsibility for the Gaeltacht in 1956 and the establishment of a Gaeltacht development authority (Údarás na Gaeltachta) in 1979, little has changed in the intervening years, which led to Údarás na Gaeltachta reporting in their annual report of 1991 that the apparatus of the State itself was one of the main forces behind the increased use of English in the Gaeltacht (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 1991). A further effort was made in 1994 when the then Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht issued a set of non-statutory directives outlining the operational language responsibilities of public sector organisations in relation to Gaeltacht areas. Further research carried out by Bord na Gaeilge (1996) and Ó Cinnéide & Ní Chonghailge (1996) showed that these directives had no tangible effect. The most recent initiative designed to come to grips with this language planning issue is the preparation by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands of an Official Languages Equality Bill, due for publication later this year.

In response to this debate some public sector organisations, including Bord na Gaeilge (1996) have suggested that one of the reasons that public sector organisations don't provide a satisfactory level of service through the medium of Irish, is that a sufficient level of demand doesn't exist. This argument has been rebutted in several publications, most notably by Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge (1998), who argued that it is unreasonable to expect that a high level of demand would come from Irish speakers for a service which they perceive doesn't exist, is of a poor quality, or in circumstances where they have learnt from previous experience that to demand a service through Irish leads to unacceptable delays or other difficulties.

The aim of this paper is to examine this issue from the perspective of the way in which power is distributed between clients and public sector organisations and to analyse why Irish speaking clients might adopt or choose English as their language of choice in their dealings with some organisations and Irish in their dealings with others.



CONGRÉS MUNDIAL SOBRE POLÍTICAS LINGÜÍSTICAS
CONGRÈS MONDIAL SUR LES POLITIQUES LINGUISTIQUES
CONGRESO MUNDIAL SOBRE POLITICAS LINGÜÍSTICAS
WORLD CONGRESS ON LANGUAGE POLICIES Barcelona, 16-20 d'abril de 2002

A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF POWER

Sociological literature presents us with three different views of power. Firstly there is the 'one-dimensional' view that defines power as simply the 'power of A to get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' (Dahl, 1957). This view assumes that power is only present in a decision-making context where observable behaviour allows us to judge whose interests prevail, for example, in situations where we can deduce that A is using his power over B, because we have information that allows us to conclude that B does not wish to do what A is forcing him/her to do. Bachrach and Baratz (1963) have argued that this definition is inadequate as it does not cover uses of power that have the effect of not allowing B to voice his interest in the first place. Thus, they propose a 'two-dimensional' view of power that adds the concept of 'non-decision making power' to Dahl's definition - for example, situations in which an individual or group controls the decision making process in such a way that another individual or group cannot participate or cannot make their needs, wants, views etc. heard. Lukes (1974), postulates that both of these views of power are inadequate to describe the full extent of the sources and use of power in society. He argues that power can also be used to influence, shape and determine people's wants and that the supreme and most insidious exercise of power [is] to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it because it is divinely ordained and beneficial. (Lukes, 1974: 24)

Thus, power is also exercised through the ability of the social and political system 'to determine decisive socialisation processes, and, therefore, the power to produce reality.' (Berger and Luckman, 1966:137). Lukes (1974:21) argues that in this context 'the bias of the system can be mobilised, recreated and reinforced in ways that are neither consciously chosen nor the intended result of particular individuals' choices.'

The way we define our reality includes the way we define the linguistic context in which we exist. In a monolingual society our definition of our linguistic context is one dimensional in that we simply accept that everybody speaks language X and that every organisation functions through the medium of language X, with exceptions being few and usually confined to individuals who enter our society from some other society. In a bilingual or multilingual society the linguistic context is more complex. The individual may have a preference and usually has a higher competence in one language over another, however, in order to communicate, she/he must also take into account what language/languages other communicants speak. Once this has been established one normally expects the following conversation to be in the language in which both communicants have the highest level of competence or in a mixture of both languages in situations where neither person has sufficient competence to communicate effectively in the language of the other. In an organisational setting, however, people are inclined to assign a particular language to a particular organisation as part of the socialisation process through which individuals learn about organisational and other aspects of their environment. Thus for Irish speakers in Ireland's bilingual society their definition of reality includes a view of organisations which is language specific i.e. some organisations are perceived to function through the medium of English and other organisations are perceived to function through the medium of Irish. Thus when an Irish speaker from an Irish speaking district, enters his local pub, which according to his definition of reality normally functions through the medium of Irish, his 'default' language, i.e. the language he unconsciously adopts as his medium of communication will be Irish. However, when entering Government Office, which according to his definition of reality normally operates through the medium of English, his 'default' language will be English.

In addition, when a client enters a public sector organisation she/he is not looking for service through the medium of a specific language i.e. in this case Irish or English. In other words an English speaker doesn't go into the local Motor Tax Office in Dublin and demand to renew their car tax through the medium of English - she/he simply goes in, fills in a form, brings it to the counter and pays the cashier and leaves with an updated car tax disk. During this process the client is probably unaware that the whole business is conducted in English. In a similar vein a Gaeltacht client going into the office of the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands or Údarás na Gaeltachta is not looking for service through Irish, they simply go in asking for the information or services they require and leave when their request has been satisfied - they are probably unaware in any active sense that the transaction has been in Irish. In each case the client has accepted the 'default' language of the organisation, although the 'default' language is



CONGRÉS MUNDIAL SOBRE POLÍTICAS LINGÜÍSTICAS
CONGRÈS MONDIAL SUR LES POLITIQUES LINGUISTIQUES
CONGRESO MUNDIAL SOBRE POLITICAS LINGÜÍSTICAS
WORLD CONGRESS ON LANGUAGE POLICIES Barcelona, 16-20 d'abril de 2002

different in each case. Their definition of reality, as determined by the decisive socialisation processes of society includes an acceptance that the default language in certain organisations is English and in other organisations it is Irish and they act accordingly. They have no rational reason to 'demand' a particular service through the medium of a language other than the 'default' language they assume in their dealings with that organisation. In other words, they are simply looking for a service and are predisposed to accept the service in the language in which it is delivered provided they have the language competence to do so.

Furthermore, if an Irish speaker decides to test that reality, because she/he prefers to use Irish or feels that public sector organisations should be able to deliver services through Irish, and finds that the organisation is either unable or unwilling to deliver the service required in Irish or that the level of service in Irish is unsatisfactory, his/her initial definition of reality will be further reinforced.

Thus, in the Irish linguistic context the decisive socialisation processes act to produce a bilingual reality. Within this bilingual reality some organisations are perceived to be Irish-language specific and therefore Irish will be the 'default' language adopted by clients in their dealings with them. In the case of the vast majority of public sector organisations, however, they are perceived to be English language specific and by extension English is the 'default' language adopted by clients in their dealings with them. This 'linguistic' socialisation process is persistent, is driven by observation and practice, and is reinforced by the reaction of public sector organisations when Irish-speaking clients deviate from the norm by looking for services through the medium of Irish. The language legislation being proposed will not be effective unless it is designed to deal with these sociolinguistic realities and the process by which they are created.

An Organisational View of Power

French and Raven (1959) suggest that five bases of social power exist i.e.

- Reward Power - Power based on the ability of the power holder to reward another.
- Coercive Power - Power based on the ability of the power-holder to punish another.
- Legitimate Power - power based on the belief that the power-holder has a legitimate right to exert influence and that the power receiver has a legitimate obligation to accept the influence.
- Referent Power - power based on the power receiver having an identification with the power-holder.
- Expert Knowledge: power based on the power-holder possessing expert knowledge or expertise needed by another. This would include Informational Power, i.e. control over access to information needed by another.

If we look at the power context of the relationship between a client and the representative of a public sector organisation it is reasonable to assume that in the vast majority of cases the power differential in relation to all of these factors will normally be in favour of the public servant i.e.

- Reward Power: The public servant will be in a position to reward the client, by providing a service, information, assistance etc., while she/he will not normally be dependent on the client for any type of reward.
- Coercive Power: The public servant may be in a position to punish the client, by forcing him/her to comply with some regulation/legislation or by withholding a service, information, assistance etc.
- Legitimate Power: the client will not normally question the legitimacy of the public servant or of his or her organisation.
- Referent Power: the client may in some cases at least, see the public servant as somebody who stands for values that she/he holds.
- Expert Power: The public servant will be viewed by the client as having both an expert knowledge of the service or assistance she/he requires and of having access or of being a gatekeeper to the information required by him/her.

Given these factors the power balance of the public servant/client relationship is going to favour the public servant, in all but the most exceptional of cases. In addition the power base of the client will be limited to their own individual power base, whereas the power of the public servant will be both individual and collective, i.e. their power will emanate from their own status and from that of the organisation and of the state. In these circumstances it seems reasonable to assume that the public sector organisation-client relationship is almost always a dependency relationship in which the client is dependant on the public servant for a service, assistance, information etc., and in which the power differential favours the public sector organisation and its agents.



CONGRÉS MUNDIAL SOBRE POLÍTICAS LINGÜÍSTICAS
CONGRÈS MONDIAL SUR LES POLITIQUES LINGUISTIQUES
CONGRESO MUNDIAL SOBRE POLITICAS LINGÜÍSTICAS
WORLD CONGRESS ON LANGUAGE POLICIES Barcelona, 16-20 d'abril de 2002

Kotter (1975), in discussing relationships between the power of managers and their level of dependency on subordinates, argues that the more people perceive they are dependent the more they will be inclined to co-operate with the person on which they are dependent. Given that the client-public servant relationship is a dependency relationship, clients will be predisposed to co-operating with the public servant by choosing to communicate in what they perceive to be the preferred language of the public servant rather than take the perceived or real risk of antagonising the public servant by choosing to communicate in the client's preferred language. Because of this it is the public servant rather than the client who determines what language will be used during the transaction. Therefore, to be effective, the focus of the proposed language legislation must be on changing the language practices of public sector organisations and their agents rather than on trying to change the language behaviour of clients.

Conclusion

To summarise, Irish speakers, both within the Gaeltacht and elsewhere, are predisposed to using English in their dealings with the vast majority of public sector organisations because their definition of reality is that these are organisations that normally function through the medium of English and therefore the 'default' language which they adopt in their transactions with them will be English. In addition the power differential between the client and the public servant means that it is normally the public servant rather than the client who determines what language will be used during the client-public servant transaction.

The vast majority of Irish speakers are bilingual and have a sufficient competence in English to fully avail of the services provided in the vast majority of cases and therefore have no situational need to 'demand' a service in Irish. Even in situations where they would prefer to access services through the medium of Irish, the fact that they are dependent on the public servant/organisation suggests that they are unlikely to demand such services in Irish because of the risk, whether perceived or real, that this might result in antagonising the public servant responsible for delivering the service and thus jeopardise their access to the service or assistance they require. In addition, there is evidence, (Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, 1998; Ó Cinnéide & Ní Chonghaile, 1996), that when Irish speakers have tried to access public services through the medium of Irish that their experience has been that the capacity of public sector organisations to deliver such services has either been non-existent or that their delivery has been of a significantly lower standard than the quality of service available through the medium of English. Thus their initial perception that these organisations can only function through the medium of English has been reinforced.

This is not to argue that Irish speakers should be forced to accept services through the medium of English, it is simply to explain why they would accept services through the medium of English even when, in some cases, this places them at a considerable disadvantage in their dealings with the public sector or where they are fully aware of their legal entitlement to demand public services through the medium of Irish. To suggest that Irish speakers should 'demand' services through the medium of Irish, in the above linguistic context is in effect to say that:

- (a) Irish speaking clients can overcome the 'default' languages set by public sector organisations.
- (b) That the organisations in question have a realistic alternative to their 'default' language.
- (c) That the power-differential between Irish speaking clients and public servants can be changed in such that it is the client rather than the public servant who determines the language used in the transaction.
- (d) That Irish-speaking clients should give priority to their use of Irish over their need to gain access to the services, assistance, information etc. provided by public sector organisations.

The constitutional position of Irish as the first official language requires public sector organisations to deliver services through Irish to Irish speakers and in the case of some services at least, particularly in the area of education and health, the lack of an adequate provision of services for Irish speakers means that some of the more basic human rights of individuals are not being met. Thus, there is both a constitutional and moral onus on Irish public sector organisations to deliver their services through the medium of Irish to Irish speakers. Given, that the balance of power in the public servant-client relationship is clearly weighted towards the public servant it seems unreasonable, even illogical, to place an onus on the client to 'demand' services through Irish, as a means of resolving the problems of the public sector in meeting their constitutional obligations. While it is clear that changes in the current practice of providing services through the medium of English to Irish speakers will require the active involvement and support of both public

sector organisations and their Irish speaking clients, the above analysis suggests that the onus for change must come from the public sector organisations rather than their clients, because the balance of power in the client-public servant transaction is such that clients do not have a sufficient power base to force such change.

While the proposed Official Languages Equality Bill will clarify both the rights of Irish speakers and the obligations of public service organisations in this context, it will need to go much further if it is to change the nature of the power dynamic underlying current linguistic behaviour and practices in the public servant - Irish speaking client relationship. For example, for the unconscious acceptance by Irish speakers of English as the 'default' language of public service organisations to be overcome, their definition of the linguistic reality must be changed. There are two possible ways of achieving this. One is for such organisations to develop the capacity to deliver services through Irish at all levels and in all sectors of the organisation and then to focus on creating an awareness amongst Irish speakers that they also function through the medium of Irish as well as English - i.e. change their perception of the linguistic reality. This however, would require a major organisational change effort and would mean that Irish medium services would not be targeted where they are most likely to be taken up by Irish speakers. The second option would be to follow a more targeted approach, involving the creation of special Irish language units within public sector organisations, which are capable of delivering all of the services of the organisation through the medium of Irish. In this way, all that is needed is to convince Irish-speaking clients that these particular units, rather than the whole organisation, function through Irish and that the 'default' language of the unit will be Irish. For example, one Local Government Authority has recently decided to establish one of its regional offices within a Gaeltacht area, and it is envisaged that this office will have the capacity to deliver the office based services of the Authority through the medium of Irish to Gaeltacht and other Irish speaking clients. Provided it is clear that this local office functions through Irish it is to be expected that the Authority's Irish speaking clients will adopt Irish as their 'default' language when dealing with that particular office, in the same way as they do in their dealings with the local offices of Údarás na Gaeltachta and the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands. For this approach to be sustainable, however, it is essential that competent Irish speakers staff the local office, that the normal everyday work of the office is done through the medium of Irish, and that it is clear to potential clients that the 'preferred' language of the public servants with which they deal is Irish. In other words, it will be the Authority and its employees who are determining what language (in this case Irish) is to be used in their dealings with their Gaeltacht clients, and their clients will not be left in the unenviable position of having to decide between the use of their preferred language and unqualified access to the services, assistance or information provided by the Local Authority.

References:

- Bachrach P. and Baratz, M.S. 1963. Decisions and Nondecisions: An Analytical Framework. *American Political Science Review* 57 pp. 641-651.
- Berger, P.L. and Luckman, T. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books
- Bord na Gaeilge, 1996. *An Dátheangachais san Earnáil Phoiblí*. Dublin: Bord na Gaeilge.
- Coimisiún na Gaeltachta (1926), Report. Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig Foilseacháin an Rialtais.
- Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, 1998. *Towards a Language Act*. Dublin: Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge
- Dahl, Robert A. 1957. The Concept of Power. *Behavioural Sciences* 2 pp 201-205
- French, J.R.P. Jnr. and Raven, B. 1959. The Bases of Social Power in *Studies in Social Power*. pp. 150-167 Cartwright, D. Ed. Michigan: Ann Arbor Institute for Social Research of the University of Michigan.
- Kotter, John P. 1975. *Power, Dependence, and effective management in Power! How to Get It, How to Use It*. Eds. Korda, Michael and Gitlin, Paul. Random House.



Lukes, Steven 1974. Power - A Radical View. Studies in Sociology Series: London: Macmillan.

Ó Cinnéide, M. agus Ní Chonghaile S. 1996. An Ghaeilge san Earnáil Phoiblí i gCeantar na Gaillimhe. Gaillimh: An tIonad Taighde sna hEolaíochtaí Sóisialta, Ollscoil na hÉireann, Gaillimh.

Údarás na Gaeltachta, 1991. Annual Report. Na Forbacha: Údarás na Gaeltachta.