

Dialogue on Language Diversity, Sustainability & Peace

'RESPECT, UNDERSTANDING AND TOLERANCE' – LANGUAGE POLICY AND THE PEACE PROCESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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'All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland' – Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations - section on 'Economic, Social and Cultural Issues', par. 3

“You Irish must be very religious. You always seem to be arguing and fighting over religion, at least in the north of your country”, the Flemish tour guide said to me some twenty-five years ago, when I was accompanying a group of young people on a study visit. At first her remark threw me off balance but then I briefly reflected on what she must have been hearing and reading – “Protestant and Catholic youths clash in Belfast after memorial service” or some other such head-line. I tried to put the good woman straight. Religion was not the key issue in the Northern Ireland ‘troubles’ and, no, I had not heard in any good arguments over religion in Belfast pubs. Football was a much more popular topic.

The struggle in Northern Ireland was and still is mostly an ethnic conflict – a conflict between the descendents of the original Celtic inhabitants and the descendents of 17th century colonists from Scotland and England. Religion, however, is an ethnic marker, just as it is in Bosnia or parts of the Middle East.

When most of the political parties in Northern Ireland signed what is now known as the Good Friday Agreement or the Belfast Agreement on 10 April 1998, a new, challenging and hopeful chapter in the history of Ireland and more especially that part of the island known as Northern Ireland. Language was but one aspect of the problem and *ipso facto* of the solution.

The Ulster Plantation

Until the end of the 16th century, Ulster, the most northerly of the Ireland's four provinces, was a citadel of Gaelic/Celtic language and culture. At the end of the century, Hugh O'Neill and Red Hugh O'Donnell, two Ulster chieftains, led a major but unsuccessful rebellion against English rule. Part of their strategy was to obtain Spanish military assistance and when this turned out to be a damp squib¹ the rebellion collapsed. O'Neill and O'Donnell went

¹ A Spanish expeditionary force, smaller than anticipated, was dispatched but instead of landing in Ulster and joining forces with the Irish, it landed in the far south, at Kinsale, and was immediately

into exile. The Elizabethan authorities decided that the best way of ensuring that Ulster would never again pose such a threat to the English throne was to expel most of the Irish from their ancestral lands and give these to English and Scottish colonists. This is known by historians as the Ulster Plantation. [It should be said that some incomers had arrived from Scotland prior to the rebellion and had settled peacefully in Ulster with the blessing of the local chieftains]. Interestingly, there were two distinct groups of colonists – the English, who were English speaking and Anglican by religion and the Scots, who spoke Scots, a West Germanic variety, and were Presbyterian (Calvinist) by religion. The English were granted large holdings of land and the Scots were to be their tenants. So, there now was a three-tier social structure, the English, who were mostly the new landowners, their Scottish tenants and the Irish who were pushed back on to the poor land (i.e. mountain and moors) and who were sometimes employed as labourers on the estates of the colonists. The Irish were Irish speaking and Catholic by religion.

Home Rule, Independence and Partition

When the demand for Irish Home Rule, a form of autonomy, reached its peak in the first two decades of the 20th century, many of the Ulster Protestant population expressed their strong opposition to it. Some Unionist and English Tory leaders blatantly played the card of religious bigotry. Catholic Nationalists would be in the majority in the Home Rule parliament and the Unionist masses were told that Home Rule would be Rome Rule. The whole issue of Home Rule was shelved with the outbreak of World War I and then the Irish War of Independence broke out, ultimately resulting in the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 – a semi-independent state covering 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland. Six counties in the north-east were omitted and formed what today is known as Northern Ireland. In the meantime, anxious to retain a firm British foothold in Ireland, the British Government of the day partitioned Ireland in 1920 and in 1921 established the Northern Ireland state which was to remain part of the United Kingdom but have its own devolved government. The boundaries of the new state did not correspond with those of the historic province of Ulster. Only six of the nine counties of Ulster were included. The aim was to ensure as large a territory as possible but with a comfortable Protestant/Unionist majority. This amounted to approximately two-thirds of the population.

Institutional discrimination was practised against the Catholic/Nationalist population. Election gerrymandering was brought to a fine art but it was in the domains of housing and employment that the most insidious forms of discrimination took place. As Nationalists tended to have larger families than Unionists, the majority population feared their numerical superiority could be eroded over a period. But if Nationalists could not obtain houses or jobs,

surrounded by English forces. O'Donnell marched to relieve the beleaguered Spaniards and surrounded the English. The English broke through and the Spanish force returned home.

they would be forced to emigrate and the ethnic balance could be retained. This led to the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement in the late 60s and early 70s and when the authorities attempted to suppress this, violence became the order of the day a violence that blighted our country for three decades and cost almost 4,000 lives.

The Irish Language – Demise and Revival

Irish is a Q-Celtic language, closely related to Scottish Gaelic and Manx Gaelic. It has been spoken in Ireland for at least 2½ millennia and has been written since the 5th century. With the demise of the old Irish order and the growing influence of English rule the language became besieged. However, on the eve of the Great Famine of 1847-1851 there were probably more Irish speakers than at any time in history – c. 4 m. The famine was but one of several factors that decimated the language and by the end of the 19th century its death seemed inevitable. But it was not the inevitable that happened but rather a miracle. A language and cultural revival started – one that caught the public imagination in an unprecedented manner.

Although the language revival movement was originally non-party political and drew support from all sections of Irish society, including people of Unionist/Protestant background in the North, it assumed a political dimension after about two decades and became closely associated with the nationalist agenda of an independent Ireland. When the Irish Free State was established in 1922, Irish became an official language, alongside of English.

However, since the establishment of the Northern Ireland state in 1921 Irish was kept in a marginalized position. It could be taught as an optional subject and was taught in a number of mostly Catholic schools. It had no place in public administration, in the legal system or in the media. The last native/historic speakers have all but died out, Irish surviving only as L2. Nevertheless it assumed an enormous symbolic importance for many people in the nationalist community. Irish classes were organised as were Irish cultural events and summer courses for young people in the Donegal Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking district), across the border in the Republic. In the 60s and 70s a small Irish-speaking community was established in West Belfast. Census data suggest around 150,000 people in Northern Ireland claiming some active ability in the language. The figure for Ireland as a whole is 1.7 m.

Scots

But what of Scots? Where did it come from? Is it a language of just a dialect of English?

Let me dispose of the last question first of all. There are no universally accepted criteria for making a clear distinction between a language and a dialect. There are a number of speech varieties in Europe today which some scholars regard as being languages while other regard them as being dialects e.g. Walloon in Belgium, Piemontese in Italy, Asturiano in Spain, Kashubian in Poland, Low German in Germany etc. I offer no simple solution but I follow one simple rule – respect the self-perception of those who use the particular variety in contention.

As far back as the 5th century the island of Britain fell prey to concerted attacks from seafaring raiders. These attacks, mounted by Germanic tribes, became more intense resulting in the establishment of a group of small (around seven) kingdoms on the east coast, stretching from The Forth to the Channel. These were settled by three distinct tribes or peoples – the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes. The most northerly of these was in Northumbria. What is present day Scotland was then mostly under the control of the Celts who spoke a language very close to Irish. Over a long period, the Celtic people, the Gaels, were driven back in a north-westerly direction with the Germanic settlers dominating the east and south. They developed their own variety of Old English later to be known as Scots. When James I (1406-1437) had the Acts of his predecessors translated from Latin, it was into the Lowland tongue (Scots) they were translated, not into Gaelic. So, Scots was now the language of the Scottish Court in Edinburgh. In passing, we might note that with the Norman French invasion, Anglo-Saxon in England underwent a kind of metamorphosis, resulting in modern English – a Germanic language with very heavy Romance influences. When James VI of Scotland left for London in 1603, to become King James I of England, Edinburgh, as a centre of political, cultural and literary power went into decline, and the Scots language with it. The Union of the Parliaments in 1707 was the final straw. Since then, Scots has survived only as the speech of the common people, not of any political establishment.

Interestingly, the Scots-speaking people adopted many of the forms of cultural expressions of their Gaelic neighbours e.g. piping, wearing of the kilt, haggis-eating. It is also curious to look at a political map of Scotland today and note that the Scots-speaking area is the stronghold of the SNP, whereas the Gaelic speakers, mostly crofters and fishermen, seem to be largely apolitical.

Scots in Ulster or Ulster-Scots

When Scots-speaking people were settled in parts of Ulster, at the beginning of the 17th century, they found themselves beholden to the English land-owning class and fearful of the native Irish. Their speech received no formal recognition and was regarded as being no more than bad English. The tongue, however, continued to be widely used in those areas where the

Scottish planters were numerous. Other groups adopted it and probably up to 25% of Scots speakers in Northern Ireland today are of Nationalist/Catholic background. In passing we might note that many of the Scots-Irish emigrated to the United States during the 18th century. Others participated in the 1798 rebellion against English rule – the first republican rebellion in Ireland. I came on a ballad written by one of the so-called rhyming weavers, popular folk poets of the Ulster-Scot community. It describes an engagement between the United Irishmen, (republicans) and the Crown forces:

TAISPEÁIN TRÉFHOILSÁN

In the 1950s and 60s, an American scholar, Gregg, carried out a linguistic survey of Ulster to see where Scots was still spoken. His survey, now outdated because of population shift to urban areas, is still an important reference point. The Scots-speaking areas today could be depicted as a kind of arc across the north of Ireland. We have no census or reliable sociolinguistic data on the number of Scots speakers but it is probably in the 30,000 – 50,000 range. Because of the close relationship of Scots to English, especially in syntax, many people speak a kind of Creole, which they probably regard as English, but that is replete with Scots words and expressions. However, little, very little, was done to conserve or restore Scots and it was only in the late 80s and early 90s that an upsurge of interest in the language became evident. The Ulster-Scots Language Society was established in 1991.

Why the revival?

Why this renewed interest in Scots? There may be a number of reasons. The 80s and 90s saw an upsurge of interest in and support for regional and minority languages across Europe. The European Parliament had adopted the two Arfé Resolutions, in 1981 and 1983 respectively, and the Kuijpers Resolution in 1987. The Council of Europe was working on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which was adopted in 1992. The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages was gaining strength and influence. Closer to home, major constitutional changes were being mooted in the United Kingdom. These culminated in a devolved parliament in Scotland and a Legislative Assembly in Wales. Most people of Unionist/Protestant background in Northern Ireland had traditionally tended to look to Scotland, rather than to England for leadership and inspiration. Now the United Kingdom was not as united as hitherto and to say, “I am British”, was not enough. Furthermore, some had become disillusioned with Westminster, feeling that the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1987 was a sell-out by Margaret Thatcher. It is also said that people of Unionist background wanted a counterpart language and culture to match the growing influence and

popularity of Irish. So it was in this climate that a growing sense of Ulster-Scots identity started to evolve.

Many people looked on the two language movements with serious concern and misgivings. Language was a highly emotive issue and here we had two distinct language movements coming from polarised communities.

Peace

In 1994 the IRA declared a ceasefire which broke down in 1995 but was then restored. Political discussions on the future of Northern Ireland started and these culminated with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. All major political parties signed up to the Agreement bar the Democratic Unionist Party. A power-sharing executive was established and six North-South Implementation Bodies were established – bodies nominated by both governments and with executive powers in certain areas. One of these related to language. Both the Irish and British governments underpinned the Good Friday Agreement with a formal international agreement. This in turn led to the British-Irish Agreement Act of 1999, formally establishing the implementation bodies. One of the implementation bodies, deals with language is probably the most complicated one in structure. It has two distinct sections – one dealing with Irish and one with Ulster-Scots. Foras na Gaeilge is the Irish language agency and Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch is the Ulster-Scots one. Each has its own Chairperson and its own Chief Executive.

The conceptualisation of accommodating linguistic diversity, as expressed in the Good Friday Agreement, is quite different to many other models e.g. those of the Südtirol or the Basque Autonomous Community. It not only aims for respect, understanding and tolerance but envisages both lesser used autochthonous languages and indeed those of immigrants groups, as being part of a common heritage.

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Despite the concerns of many, the two language agencies have worked well together and whatever difficulties or shortcomings they may have do not emanate from any hostility towards each other.

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

The United Kingdom signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in March 2000 and ratified it a year later. Part III cover has been given to Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and Irish (in Northern Ireland). Part II cover

has been given to Scots in Scotland, Ulster-Scots in Northern Ireland, and later to Cornish and Manx Gaelic.

The responsible ministry in Northern Ireland, the Department for Culture, Arts & Leisure, has established an inter-departmental committee to oversee the implementation of the Charter provisions.

NGO sector

This cordial relationship is not confined to official circles only. As far back as 1991, the Ulster-Scots Language Society applied to join the Northern Ireland Sub-Committee of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages. I was Secretary General of the organisation at the time and advised the then Chairman of the Sub-Committee, who had contacted me, to welcome them aboard. This is what happened and the two elements on the Sub-Committee have worked well together ever since.

In 1998, we organised a major seminar in Belfast City Hall on the theme, 'Our Language Heritage in Europe'. We had initially planned an evening event, attracting around 50 people. It snowballed into a full-day event with 220 people enrolling. The City Council hosted a buffet meal for all who attended. It was unique at the time to find political parties, bitterly opposed to each other, vying to support the event.

In 1999, the launch of 'Rejoice in Your Own Works', a book of poetic prose, a series of reflections on a passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes, published in Irish, Ulster-Scots, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh and English, offered another occasion for a joint venture. Following an ecumenical prayer service, a copy of the book was presented to the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mo Mowlam, by two young people, one Irish speaking, the other Ulster-Scots speaking.

In 2001, the European Bureau, held its first forum on Partnership for Diversity. It was scheduled for Ireland and I was asked to organise it. We had the first day of the two-day event in Dublin Castle, with Foras na Gaeilge hosting it, and the second day in Stormont, the seat of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly, hosted by Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch.

Although the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages and I parted company shortly afterwards, I have tried to help people engaged in fostering this kind of cross-community cooperation. With the backing of the two language agencies and the British Council, a two-day conference on Language & Law in Northern Ireland was held last year in Stormont last year. It was an eminent success. I edited the paper given on that occasion and they were launched in January of this year in the Queen's University, Belfast, by Nobel Peace Prize laureate, John Hume.

A group of experts from Moldova and Estonia, organised by the Soros Foundation, visited Belfast last November to see language and cultural revival in a post-conflict situation. Again, I must say that I received wonderful cooperation from both language movements while organising the visit.

Last month, Foras na Gaeilge organised a major European conference in Dublin during the Irish Presidency of the EU. Its theme was linguistic diversity in education and it was called Voces Diversae. There were speakers and participants present from both language communities in Northern Ireland. It was also interesting that everyone seemed to accept that this was perfectly normal.

A new version of The Book of Common Prayer, the standard prayer-book in the Anglican Communion has been prepared and published this year. It has been translated into Irish by a Church of Ireland minister from Belfast, Rev. Garry Hastings. It should be in print shortly. To mark its publication, a weekend seminar and inter-denominational service of prayer will be held in Downpatrick in September.

So linguistic diversity is bringing people together – not creating divisions.

The Future

The political future of Northern Ireland is sadly still uncertain. The Legislative Assembly and the Executive have been suspended. Recent elections returned hard-line parties, the DUP on the Unionist side and Sinn Féin on the Nationalist side, as the two largest parties. Even getting discussion started is proving to be a major task. There is still sporadic violence, but nothing on the scale of that in the 70s, 80s and early 90s, and the decommissioning of paramilitary arms is not complete. [Indeed, it has hardly started on the Loyalist side]. police reforms and the demilitarisation of certain areas have not been completed either. Our Taoiseach [Prime Minister], Bertie Ahern, summed it up well, in my opinion, when he described it as a ‘deficit of trust’.

But despite everything, there is hope. Nobody want to go back to the bad days of bombings, internment, shootings, torture, intimidation and repression. The economy is growing and people’s standard of living is improving. Even if the politicians are still talking at each other, rather than to each other, ordinary people are now communicating and interacting in a new way. Linguistic diversity never causes divisions: it is a lack of respect for diversity that leads to alienation, anger and conflict. Working for diversity brings people together. Northern Ireland offers us living proof of that. I

now find myself telephoning, e-mailing and visiting people whom I would never have even known twelve of fifteen years ago – people who hold very different political views to my own, but people who share with me a belief that in respect for linguistic and cultural diversity lies the key for a brighter future.