



IRISH - OFFICIAL YET LESSER USED

Dónall Ó Riagáin

Irish is a Q-Celtic or Goidelic language, closely related to Scottish Gaelic and the Gaelic of the Isle of Man. It is more distantly related to the three P-Celtic languages - Welsh, Cornish and Breton. Historians are not agreed as to when the Celts first arrived in Ireland but it was at least 500 BC, possibly a lot earlier. Irish has been written since the sixth century and quickly developed a rich oral and written literary tradition.

The 12th century saw the arrival of the Anglo-Normans and the beginning of a long and troubled relationship between Ireland and its neighbouring island. Despite continual wars with the English invaders, powerful regional Gaelic chieftains throughout most of the island provided the necessary institutional support for Irish between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. After the collapse of an insurrection by Irish chieftains in the northern province of Ulster at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the English authorities drove the indigenous inhabitants off most of their ancestral lands and replaced them with colonists from England, who were Anglican in religion and English speaking, and others from the south of Scotland, who were Presbyterian in religion and Scots speaking. It is in this plantation that the present-day problems of Northern Ireland have their origin.

Although the Gaelic political and military order was now beginning to break up, the impact of this development on the language was not fully felt for almost another two centuries. It is estimated that probably more people spoke Irish during the decade preceding the Great Famine of 1845-1851 than at any time in the history of the language. De Fréine suggests that around 1800 less than a third of the population [around one and a half million people] spoke English only, some two million spoke Irish only and half a million were bilingual.

Nevertheless, the seeds of its almost total demise had been sown a century earlier. Because of the defeat of the Catholic Jacobites by the Protestant Williamites during the war of 1690-1692 the great bulk of the Irish people, who were Catholic and had supported James II, were dispossessed of their lands and were persecuted for the practice of their religion. They were barred from holding public office, deprived of the right to vote and in every sense were marginalized. Despite this, or arguably because of it, their language, Irish, and its attendant culture flourished in the cabins of the poor. The Catholic Irish hoped and prayed for a Jacobite restoration, which never came. The battle of Culloden in 1745 finally put paid to any chance of a Stuart regaining the English throne and henceforth the Catholic masses sought to find ways and means of surviving within the existing political system.

As the years went by and any threat to the political establishment receded, many of the more Draconian anti-Catholic penal laws were enforced with less vigour. As a result, a Catholic petit-bourgeois class gradually started to evolve. Their main concern was to demonstrate to the authorities that being Catholic or Irish did not detract from their loyalty to the monarchy. And what better way to demonstrate this than to drop Irish, switch to English and adopt English cultural values?

During the 18th century young Irishmen who wished to become Catholic priests left the country and studied in Irish colleges across the continent - at Rome, Leuven, Salamanca, Paris, to mention but a



few. After ordination, they quietly slipped back into Ireland and commenced their ministry. Because of their fear of French revolutionary ideas, that were undoubtedly influencing some young priests, and because of the patent failure of the penal laws to suppress Catholicism, the British government paid for the building of a Catholic seminary in Ireland, at Maynooth, in 1795. There was a price to be paid, however, but one which the Catholic hierarchy was quite willing to pay - loyalty, unquestioning loyalty to the British throne. Students entering Maynooth College were obliged to take an oath of loyalty to the monarch - and this they did.

In 1829 the Catholics were granted emancipation, that is to say the more oppressive anti-Catholic laws were removed from the statute book. This brought the Catholic hierarchy even more onto the side of the establishment. And, because of the influence of the Church, this was to have a profound effect on the attitudes of the great mass of the people. In 1831 legislation brought the so-called national schools into existence. Of course, national in this case meant English. English was the language of instruction. Not only was Irish not taught but children were punished for speaking Irish among themselves. An array of tools were employed to this end - tally sticks, wooden gags, humiliation and mockery. This practise, in one form or another, continued until the early years of the 20th century.

The population had grown steadily during the early years of the 19th century. The great mass of the people lived in dire poverty on non-viable smallholdings and depended almost exclusively on one crop, the potato, for sustenance. Then tragedy struck. The potato crop was afflicted by blight in 1845 and the malady continued until 1851. The poor were left starving. The large farms, owned by English landlords, continued to produce grain and grass for herds of cattle. These products continued to be exported notwithstanding the fact that people were dying from starvation. Between death from starvation and mass emigration, mostly to America, the population of the island was halved within a decade. This was Ireland's holocaust.

Linguistically it was also a disaster. Most of the four million souls who died from hunger or who left for America on the "coffin ships", so called because so many of the passengers died from famine fever before reaching their destination, were monoglot Irish speakers. The famine left a terrible scar on the Irish psyche and added an impetus to the negative forces already at play - despair, low self-esteem, a feeling of helplessness and almost total dependency on the English establishment.

An Irish emigrant arriving in America, with even a little broken English, had a head start over his Italian, German or Hispanic counterparts. There was a lesson here for any Irish speaker thinking of emigrating to escape the poverty trap.

For those who did not emigrate during the second half of the nineteenth century, but remained at home, English was becoming more and more important. They might join the newly established Royal Irish Constabulary or qualify as national teachers. English was the language of the courts and business. It was the language of the sermon in church. In short, Irish was the language of backwardness and marginalisation whereas English was the language of upper social mobility.

These lessons were not lost on the people. They abandoned Irish as quickly as they could and collaborated with the schools in forcing their children to use only English. By 1890, Irish was known by only 15% of the population and an analysis of the figures show that these people belonged the older age groups and inhabited mostly remote areas in the west of the country. Dr. Douglas Hyde, the father of the Irish language revival movement and later President of Ireland, described the situation succinctly when he said, "...the Irish race is at present in a most anomalous position, imitating England and yet apparently hating it".

Irish, as a living vernacular, was in free-fall and any sociologist in language, had such a discipline existed back then, could only conclude that the language would die out completely within one generation. But it was not the inevitable that happened - but rather a miracle.

There were a few voices in the wilderness, which, against the tide, advocated doing something to stem the total demise of Irish. In 1876 the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language was established, followed by the breakaway Gaelic Union in 1880. Their courage and foresight should not be forgotten,



as they so often are.

However, it was in 1893, when an organisation called the Gaelic League was established in Dublin, that marked progress started to become evident. The objective of the Gaelic League was to conserve Irish as a living vernacular. Its gospel was one of hope and self-respect. The Irish were a great people with a past of which they could be proud. Their language and attendant culture were rich, beautiful and of great antiquity. The Irish people should stop being slaves, should be proud and self-reliant and should restore their language to its rightful place in the life of the nation. Its first President was Douglas Hyde, the son of a Church of Ireland clergyman from Co. Roscommon. Against all the odds the message of the Gaelic League was heard and accepted by more and more people throughout the country. Language classes were organised, traditional storytelling, singing, music and dancing were fostered and campaigns launched to advance Irish in everyday life. The Gaelic League also supported Irish industry and encouraged the public to buy Irish goods. The League was non-partisan in any party or sectarian sense. It enjoyed support from all section of Irish society, including many Ulster unionists.

Most Irish nationalists in the 19th century were not particularly interested in the Irish language or its fate. They were primarily political nationalists whose main [and in some instances, sole] objective was the establishment of an independent Irish state. Even constitutional nationalists, like O'Connell, in the first half of the century, and Parnell in the latter part, did not concern themselves with language and culture. But the Gaelic League was to change all of that.

Although the Gaelic League was non-political, and indeed enjoyed the support of many people who favoured maintaining the union with Britain, its message led a growing number of its young adherents to set their sights on the goal of an independent Irish state, where Irish might be accorded its rightful place. At its 1915 Ard-Fheis [Annual Convention], the League, against the strong advice of Hyde, included the "freedom of Ireland" among its objectives.

The start of the First World War led to a polarisation in Irish political life with the majority favouring Irish support for Britain's war effort and a more radical minority seeing Britain's difficulty as Ireland's opportunity. The more radical and militant element redefined and developed nationalist thinking, fusing cultural nationalism, political nationalism and social reform into a coherent and integrated political doctrine. Pearse, the leader of the short-lived and unsuccessful insurrection in 1916 declared that what he wanted was an Ireland 'not free merely but Gaelic also, not Gaelic merely but free also'.

Sinn Féin, the republican, separatist party, won a majority of the Irish seats in the British general election of 1918. Instead of taking their seats at Westminster they set up an independent parliament in Dublin and declared a republic. Ministers were appointed and a programme of government was adopted of which the revival of Irish was one of the main objectives. Not surprisingly, the British did not recognise the new state and set about suppressing it. A four-year guerrilla war ensued, culminating in the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. Tragically, this was followed by a disastrous civil war in 1922-1923.

But despite the divisions created by the civil war, one thing was clear - the revival of Irish was henceforth to be an integral and indispensable aim of every Irish government. Irish was our own language - our national language - and our distinct nationhood depended on its preservation and promotion. It was only logical that it be made an official language and accorded a high degree of prestige.

It is not the purpose of this paper to review the Irish language revival, its failures, its successes, its difficulties and triumphs. It could be described as being a qualified success but by no means the kind of revival envisaged by the revolutionaries of the early 20th century. Approximately 1.5 m. people now claim an active knowledge of the language but only about 150,000 use it as L1 . 354,000 people claim to use it daily and a further 124,000 at least weekly. Intergenerational transmission is disturbingly low. On the other hand, attitudinal support is very high and even people whose knowledge of the language is minimal often display a strong emotional attachment to it.

It is imperative to understand the historical background to Irish and its partial revival if one is to understand the paradoxical and at times hypocritical behaviour of Irish people and their governments in



matters linguistic. The late Professor David Greene put it wittily and succinctly when he said that most Irish people wanted to revive Irish in the same way as they wanted to go to heaven - with a minimum of inconvenience!

Article 8 of Bunreacht na hÉireann [Constitution of Ireland], enacted in 1937, states that:

- 1 The Irish language as the national language is the first official language.
- 2 The English language is recognised as a second official language.
- 3 Provision may, however, be made by law for the exclusive use of either of the said languages for any one or more official purposes, either throughout the State or in any part thereof.

Article 25.4 has an interesting provision, which states that:

In case of conflict between the texts of any copy of this Constitution enrolled under this section, the text in the national language shall prevail.

There is a certain irony in this as the Irish version of the Constitution is a translation of the English text!

Most bills submitted to the houses of the Oireachtas [Dáil and Seanad] are prepared in English and are translated into Irish only after enactment, sometimes after a considerable delay.

Notwithstanding the high constitutional recognition accorded to Irish, English is by far the dominant language in almost all domains of national life. There is an enormous gap between the theoretical position of Irish and its real position. Irish speakers wishing to use Irish in their everyday lives can expect obstruction and delays, even when dealing with government. Máirtín Ó Cadhain [=1970], author, polemicist, one-time revolutionary, described the situation, as he saw it, "In Ireland the Government guarantees the right and provides the means for having the Irish language taught. However, outside of the schools, it makes the functioning of that language, in any practicable form, impossible".

Ireland is in an unusual position in that, although officially bilingual, it has no legislation regulating the use of the two official languages. It is expected that a long promised Official Languages Bill will be published within a month or two. The Bill was to be published before Christmas 2001 but it was delayed and is now almost certainly not going to be enacted during the term of office of the current government. Its objectives are to specify the language rights of citizens consistent with constitutional status of both languages; to specify the obligations of Departments of State and of the public sector to provide services for citizens in the official languages; to place a statutory obligation on Departments of State and public organisations to make specific provision for delivery of an agreed quantum of State services through Irish; to assign general responsibility to the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht & the Islands in regard to the delivery of State services through Irish; and to provide for the overseeing, monitoring and enforcing of the Act by the establishment of the Office of the Official Languages Commissioner.

Ireland joined the European Communities, now known as the European Union, in 1973. An opening existed to make Irish an official and working language, along with English, French, German, Dutch, etc. But the Irish Government of the day balked at the idea and sought to have Irish made an official, but not a working, language of the Communities. The reason for the Irish Government of the day making such an 'astonishing proposal', as one Commission official described it, was explained by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Patrick Hillery TD, in a letter, dated 23 July 1971, which he sent to the European Commission. 'We fully realise that the official translation into Irish of all Community acts could give rise to serious problems of a practical nature', the Minister claimed. Arguing for the granting of official status, he said, 'Indeed, I can say that, having regard to the unique position of the Irish language in our national culture, both our Parliament and people would expect that such recognition be given'. Herein we find an implicit recognition that, while Irish was 'official', it was in fact 'lesser used'. However, the logic of this position was not adhered to some years later when a decision had to be taken on another European development, which impinged on Irish - the adopted by the Council of Europe in 1992 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and it being accorded the legal form of an international convention.

No such "in between" status, that of an official language, which was not a working language, existed,



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nor indeed yet exists, and the result is that Irish is neither an official, nor a working language of the EU . However, authentic and official versions of the EU Treaty and other fundamental documents are available in Irish and enjoy equal status with those in the eleven official and working languages. Irish may also be used in the European Parliament and the European Court of Justice, subject to certain conditions. Irish is also included in certain EU programmes, such as the LINGUA [language teaching action] of the Socrates Programme, while the other Celtic languages are excluded. Furthermore, an Irish citizen is entitled to write in Irish to any of the official EU institutions and receive a reply in that language.

In 1984, a move was made in the Council of Europe to have a legal instrument prepared, which would protect and promote Europe's lesser used languages. This led to the adoption by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in 1992 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and to it according to it the legal form of an international convention. The Charter is unique in that it is the only international convention, specifically intended to protect lesser used languages. Ireland played an active and respected role in the preparatory work leading to the adoption of the document . A phrase stating that a ratifying country could apply the Charter to an "official language less widely used on the whole or part of its territory " was included to cover the position of Irish. Nevertheless successive Irish governments have refused to sign the Charter because they claim it could undermine the constitutional position of Irish. This is even more ironic when one considers that both Finland and Switzerland have used the 'official language less widely used' provision in their instruments of ratification in order to cover Swedish [in the case of Finland] and Italian and Rhaeto-Romance [in the case of Switzerland]. It must be conceded that the use of terms, such as 'regional' and 'minority' have given rise to problems. Most Irish people would regard the use of either term, in respect of Irish to be both inaccurate and insulting. At the beginning of April 2002, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages had now been signed by 28 European democracies and has already been ratified by 16 of them. Among the ratifying states is the United Kingdom and, as a result, varying degrees of protection and promotion are being accorded to Welsh, Gàidhlig and Irish.

It is suspected by some that the real reason for Ireland not signing the Charter was because neither the government nor the public service wanted to be pinned down to certain concrete commitments as ratifying Part III of the Charter would entail. We see here again the dilemma of Irish being 'official' de jure while being 'lesser used' de facto. While official recognition is normally seen as a prerequisite for a language receiving strong support, we find it here being used to withhold supportive measures. This is not to say that Irish does not receive generous governmental funding. It does. But by insidiously refusing to reconcile the official recognition of Irish with the de facto problems of those who use it, a kind of unreal, fantasy world has been created in which frustration and cynicism breed.

Another interesting development was to take place in the early 80s - the development of Irish interest in the possibilities of furthering Irish and other lesser used languages within the European Communities. In 1979, A Northern Ireland European parliamentarian, John Hume, now a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, tabled a motion for resolution in the European Parliament, co-signed by a Socialist member from each of the member states, calling for the drawing up of a 'Bill of Rights of the Regional Languages and Cultures of the Community'. The motion for resolution was passed to a parliamentary committee, which in turn appointed a rapporteur to prepare a motion for resolution and an accompanying report. This aroused an interest among some language activists in Ireland, not least because of the fact that the prime mover was a highly respected Irish parliamentarian. The author made contact with Hume and was introduced by him to the rapporteur, Gaetano Arfé, an Italian member. This led to the organisation of a one-day seminar under the aegis of Gael Linn, an Irish language and cultural organisation. An effective lobbying campaign ensued in which all Irish MEPs were contacted. They in turn sought the backing of their political groups. The Arfé Resolution was adopted on 16 October 1981 by a comfortable majority.

The following year, 1982, at a colloquy organised in Brussels to consider how best the provisions of the Arfé Resolution might be implemented, it was decided to establish an organisation, which could speak and act at European level on behalf of lesser used language communities. This was the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages. The author was elected its first President and was later to serve as its first Secretary general for 14½ years.



Political and financial support was sought and received from the Irish Government. An annual subvention was given to the Bureau from 1983 onwards and this, together with a European Community subvention enabled the Bureau to open a small office in Dublin and set about building up its structures and engaging in projects. The Irish subvention, which amounted to less than € 32,000 in its first year, had grown to over € 52,000 by 2001. The Bureau has had two Irish Presidents so far - the author from 1982 until 1984 and Helen Ó Murchú from 1992 until 1995.

But perhaps it was the political level that the most valuable aspect of Irish support. The Irish Commissioner and the Irish minister, at meetings of the Council of Ministers, could always be relied on to voice the concerns of users of Europe's small language communities. Ireland, although one of the smallest of the member states was now taking a leading role in preserving and fostering linguistic diversity and language rights. Whenever an issue with linguistic implications came up, the Irish Government of the day, irrespective of what party of parties might be in power, took the moral high ground. When certain member states tried to suppress the EU budget line for regional or minority languages, Irish took a firm and principled stand. It is said that the Irish delegation on one occasion went as far as blocking the adoption of the entire EU budget until line B3 - 1006 [Regional Languages and Cultures], which had been voted out, was restored. Irish MEPs, irrespective of party affiliation, could be counted on to do the 'right thing' whenever there was a critical vote e.g. on the budget.

This development was not universally welcomed in Ireland. Besides those who thought that the Irish members of the Bureau would be better engaged promoting Irish in Ireland than in trying to make a breakthrough at European level, there were others who feared that aligning Irish with languages, some of which were almost totally devoid of any official recognition, was a major tactical error. Among the most forthright and coherent proponents of this point of view was Eoghan Mac Aogáin, the Director of Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann [Linguistics Institute of Ireland]. Mac Aogáin argued that Irish should not become associated with regional languages as it was these languages that were in conflict with national languages, that the struggle of the regions was not Ireland's affair and that 'national governments' best understood the case of Irish. He also remarked elsewhere that 'lesser used is merely a euphemism for unofficial'.

While some might find this argumentation somewhat bizarre at first sight, a more thorough examination reveals that there is much evidence to support Mac Aogáin's viewpoint. For instance, in 1987, Ireland was taken to the European Court of Justice by a Dutch-born art teacher, who was teaching in Ireland but who would not be made permanent in her teaching job by the authorities because she could not pass an examination in oral Irish. The plaintiff, Ms. Anita Groener, argued that this language requirement resulted in discrimination against her because of her nationality. A fascinating aspect of the case is that France made a submission in support of the Irish position, arguing that every country had a right to protect its national language. In the event, the Court ruled in favour of Ireland, stating that "The EEC Treaty does not prohibit the adoption of a policy for the protection and promotion of a language of a Member State which is both the national language and the first official language". One wonders if Irish was not 'official' and was merely a 'regional' language, what position the European Court of Justice might have adopted.

The development and achievements of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages have been described elsewhere. Suffice it to say that the Bureau was involved one way or another in every major initiative to promote lesser used languages in Europe over the past two decades.

In February 2001 the Directors of the Bureau decided, at the behest of the European Commission, to close its Dublin Office and concentrate its entire operation in Brussels. In a written reply to a parliamentary question from the main opposition spokesperson on the Gaeltacht and the Irish language, the Minister of State at the Department for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands, Máire Ní Chochláin TD, stated on 27 March 2001 that if she received information in writing on the problems arising from the threatened closure of the Bureau's Dublin Office, she would see what could be done in order to ensure the status of the office. A clear invitation for a request to help! The invitation was ignored, no request was made and the office was closed at the end of June 2001.

It is not the aim of this paper to examine the factors that led the Commission to adopt this stance, nor is it its aim to consider the reasons why the leadership of the Bureau accepted this diktat, seemingly



without any real objection. It suffices to say that there is ample anecdotal evidence to show that the peremptory closure of the Dublin Office was seen by many in Ireland as a slap in the face for Ireland's efforts to promote linguistic rights at European level. The Government subvention was immediately stopped. The Irish electorate subsequently rejected the Nice Treaty in a referendum. While it would be totally unfounded to suggest that the closure of the Bureau's office led to this - [it most certainly was not an issue in the pre-referendum campaign] - it cannot be denied that it influenced the attitude of many Irish language activists who saw this development as striking evidence that the EU was adopting a centralist line and that the role of small states in defending linguistic diversity was not welcome.

It is difficult to evaluate how all of this may influence the linguistic policies of future Irish governments. In all probability it will impact more on Ireland's support for other lesser used languages rather than on Irish itself. It might, however, strengthen the position of those who attach great importance to the constitutional position and official recognition of Irish rather than to more practical and functional considerations. A written reply given by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Brian Cowen TD, on 5 February 02 to a parliamentary question from the Labour Party spokesperson on Foreign Affairs, Dick Spring TD, signals no new initiative on the part of the present government to seek recognition for Irish as an official and working language of the European Union. As there will be a general election in May 2002, this comes as no surprise. But as recent animated correspondence in the media shows, it is an issue, which is not set to disappear off the political agenda.

On the domestic front, it is almost certain that whatever party of parties form the next government, a draft official languages act will be put before parliament to formalise and ensure the use of both Irish and English in official affairs, in accordance with Article 8 of the Constitution. At European level, a new government might well be willing to reconsider Ireland signing and ratifying the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Matching the British initiative in Northern Ireland or being seen to meet the aspirations of the Ulster-Scots movement might well be part of the motivation for such a development.

The whole issue of official and working languages in the EU will almost certainly come up for debate in the run up to enlargement. On a broader level, consideration will have to be given sooner or later to the more-or-less accepted concepts of 'majority' and 'minority' languages. All languages spoken in the EU today are 'minority' in the sense that only a minority of EU citizens speak them as mother tongue. The strongest of these is German with 24% and Italian, French and English tying for second place with 16% each. Catalan is not an official or working language of the EU although Danish and Finnish, with fewer speakers, are. With the coming of enlargement, will Slovene with approximately 2 m. speakers become an official and working language of the Union and Catalan with 7 m. speakers remain marginalized? Can this strange 'logic' be accepted indefinitely?

Perhaps our entire reference frame needs to be overhauled. Should we not be thinking and speaking more of linguistic rights as an integral part of human rights and of linguistic diversity as a source of enrichment for all rather than focusing on the degree of official recognition to be accorded to this or that language? Conceptualising and codifying the linguistic diversity of the new Europe is certainly challenging. The importance of language, not only as means of communication, but also as a fundamental element in communal identity, should never be overlooked or underestimated. Could it be that the unusual and paradoxical position of Irish might serve as a useful model for enhancing our understanding of the many complex and challenging language situations we will almost certainly encounter over the coming decades?