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Language Policy
in Scotland and Northern Ireland
Against the Background of Irish Language Development
in the Twentieth Century

An essay originally written for the seminar
Language and Language Use in Europe in the Twentieth Century
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Introduction

The 20th century in Europe saw a strong development of languages—on the one hand, English unquestionably gained hegemony; on the other, the tendency of European countries growing together, forming a union after having developed a variety of cultures and languages for several thousand years, questioned very well the search for a monolingual continent. Moreover, people saw that it is variety that enriches mankind, which led to a European language policy that tries to do the splits between variety, protecting any inherited minority language on the continent, and unity, offering people a common language for international conversation.

If you ask an average European nowadays which languages are spoken on the British Isles, he or she will probably reply, the UK is only English-, Ireland English- and Irish-speaking. Thinking about it, he or she will add then that Scotland is bilingual, too. This essay is to show that moreover, Scotland claims and tends to be trilingual, having developed a stronger national identity since the economical uprise in the 1960s and seeking official acknowledgement of Scots, whereas biliguity in Ireland is on the decline. Another question will be what the consequences on Northern Ireland may be like, now that the former slaughterhouse¹ calms down but language attitude remains a matter of confession. As the language varieties on the British Isles are closely connected, they will possibly have an impact on each other. Thus I will show that mere restoring of a language does not work.

¹ Bernard Mac Laverty's novel *Cal* (1983) deals with the Northern Ireland conflict and begins in a slaughterhouse, which is, from my point of view, a sarcastic but very good allusion to the country's development of the last third of the 20th century.

1 Language Development in Ireland

There is always a close link between the history and the language of a country. Ireland had struggled with oppression, in particular due to the Penal Laws of 1695, with subsequent lack of economical power, then with famine and emigration, before trends turned up in the 20th century. The Irish Free State, nowadays called Republic of Ireland, became independent from the United Kingdom in 1922.² Irish language revival had already taken place in the late 19th century and Irish Gaelic, soon called Irish, has been part of the national identity ever since. Conradh na Gaeilge (The Irish League) was founded in 1893 with the aim to revive Irish as a written language. For in writing, it had not developed and therefore been practically dead for two centuries.

Irish was the national and first official language of the country³ after regaining independence, though spoken by a minority. English as the second official language⁴ is commonly said to have got equal status, although this is not explicitly mentioned in the Constitution. Moreover, some important labels, for instance political terms, are in Irish only (Dáil, Taoiseach etc.)—one might say that the two languages were equal, but Irish (as the national language) was more equal than English.⁵ Nowadays it is rather the other way round:

Even modern parliamentary legislation, though *supposed* to be issued in both Irish and English, is frequently only available in English. Much of publicly displayed Irish is ungrammatical, thus irritating both language activists and enemies of the language and contributing to the public image of the revival as phony and bogus.

[...]

In an effort to address the half-committed attitude of Irish language use by the State, the Official Languages Act was passed in 2003. This act ensures that *every* publication made by a governmental body must be published in both official languages, Irish and English. In addition, the office of Official Languages Commissioner has been set up to act as an ombudsman with regard to equal treatment in both languages.

² Encyclopaedia Britannica, section Ireland/Independent Ireland to 1959/Establishment of the Irish State.

³ The Irish constitution, Article 8 (1). <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/upload/static/256.pdf>

⁴ Ibid. Art. 8 (2).

⁵ Idea stolen from George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* (1944).

[...]

According to data compiled the Irish Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, only one quarter of households in *Gaeltacht areas* possess a fluency in Gaelic. The author of a detailed analysis of the survey, Donncha Ó hÉallaithe, described the Irish language policy followed by Irish governments a “complete and absolute disaster.” The Irish Times (January 6, 2002) [...] quoted him as follows: “It is an absolute indictment of successive Irish Governments that at the foundation of the Irish State there were 250,000 fluent Irish speakers living in Irish-speaking or semi Irish-speaking areas, but the number now is between 20,000 and 30,000.”⁶

Language attitudes turned with the economical uprise after 1959, which made traditional Ireland a modern, industrialized country.⁷ The internationally orientated young generation (“We are the young Europeans”⁸) did not want to speak a language which no one outside their quaint little island would understand, having learnt it artificially from 200 year old books. According to census data, the population of the state was 3.6 million in 1991, “nearly half the population” aged under 25. The percentage of Irish-speakers had increased to 32% from 18% in 1911.⁹ However in 1973, 60% of the Gaeltacht population had declared frequent home use of Irish, whereas only 5% did so nationwide. Recent surveys confirm these data, as the Euromosaic report shows between the lines.

So apart from the West of Ireland (Gaeltacht), Irish is a secondary language which people learn at school but most of them do not use as their everyday language. In fact, despite the eagerness to promote Irish in society, for instance by creating Irish language gathering places (Ní Chartúir 2002: 84), the use of Irish is declining in public life. Obviously the language is no more the national symbol of identity that it used to be. If it goes on like this, Irish will soon be what Latin is in Italy—part of culture and history, but not even the Pope would order a pizza in Latin.

⁶ The Free Dictionary (internet encyclopedia) <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Irish%20language>

⁷ Gibbons 1996:82, McCarthy 2000: 14ff.

⁸ Slogan cited in Gibbons 1996: 88ff.

⁹ Euromosaic/Research Centre of Wales: ‘Irish in Ireland.’

<http://www.uoc.es/euromosaic/web/document/irlandes/an/i1/i1.html> Section 2.2

2 Minority Languages in Scotland

Scotland is bi- or trilingual, depending on the question whether Scots is a dialect or a language. Murdoch (1995: 3) complains that statistics only differentiate between Gaelic and English speakers but ignore how many people actually speak Scots. He therefore claims an unfair treatment of the other minority language in Scotland concerning support by the British Government.

In the meantime, Scotland got its own parliament in 1999, but Scots has not really changed its status (yet). The Scottish Parliament website even provides information in Scots, however it is also remarked there that inquiries are possible only in English and Gaelic.¹⁰

The trouble is that the question ‘dialect or language’ is open-ended and rather an ideological matter. Definitions fail to solve the question, as McClure (1988: 17) establishes:

“It is genuinely difficult to discuss this question, much more to resolve it, because of the nebulosity of the terms. There is in fact no single criterion which can be applied in all cases to decide whether a given speech form may be classed as a language; and of the various factors which can be considered, not one provides an unambiguous answer in the case of Scots.”

Another question to be clarified is what Scots actually is. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, as many other references, considers Scots as the language (or dialect) of the Scottish Lowlands.¹¹ Sometimes Scots is also called *Lallans* (‘Lowlands’). However migration has caused a widespread far beyond the Lowlands of Scotland, as for instance to Aberdeenshire¹², which does definitely not belong to the Lowlands. Sources agree that Scots has its roots in the Middle Ages and developed on as a vernacular; in writing it

¹⁰ <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/vli/language/scots/index.htm>

¹¹ EB, section Scotland/Languages.

¹² <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/english/lines.hti>

appeared only in traditional ballads that were written down; otherwise it remained underrepresented until the 20th century.

The General Register Office for Scotland reported 1.5 million Scots speakers in 1996, which is 30% of the people (Horsbroch 2000: 138). However, nothing of Scots is to be found in the 2001 census data¹³, as Scots has not gained language status officially (yet), and funding¹⁴ is accordingly low, having increased from £15,000 in 1990 to £130,000 in the late 1990s, whereas the unquestioned minority tongue of Scotland, Gaelic, had been funded from 1979 with £100,000 annually, which was to be raised to £12 million by 2002 (according to Horsbroch 2000: 138). Spoken by 1.4% of the Scottish population (1991 census¹⁵), Gaelic is considered the second language of the Highlands and Hebrides, where it survived the regional culture being outlawed after the battle of Colloden in 1745. However, the language faced lack of recognition until “into the later 20th century,” as the latest respective Euromosaic report points out.¹⁶ The report goes on,

Gaelic communities are now thoroughly bilingual, and Gaelic usage is typically diglossic. Migration has taken many Gaelic speakers outwith the traditional ‘Gaelic-speaking area’ of the Highlands and Islands.

At the 1991 census the traditional Gaelic area of the mainland Highlands and Hebrides (—the Gaidhealtachd) was home to only 58% of Scotland’s Gaelic speakers.

¹³ It was eventually decided not to include Scots in the language question. Macafee discusses this in an article in *Scottish Language* from 2000. (Tutor’s note.)

¹⁴ Financial support by the state, offered e.g. to language societies, for broadcasting in minority languages, for education and for cultural events.

¹⁵ Horsbroch 2000: 138

¹⁶ Euromosaic/Research Centre of Wales: ‘Gaelic in Scotland (United Kingdom)’.

<http://www.uoc.es/euromosaic/web/document/gaelic/an/i1/i1.html> Quoted sections here: 2.3; 3.7

3 Minority Languages in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland exists as long as the Free State south to it; however here, Irish was a long time regarded as the language of Irish separatism and therefore “alien to the values of Northern Ireland” (Mac Giolla Chríost 2002: 434). In 1949, Irish street names had been banned by law, which was not revealed until the 1990s, and the language question had not been asked in any census prior to 1991, one year before the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was brought about.¹⁷ In that census, 9.45% stated competence in Irish.¹⁸

The language has played a major role in the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants since the late 1960s, and 22% of the Catholics declare themselves Irish-speakers, however only 4% of all other religious groups together, less than 1% of each main Protestant denomination.¹⁹ Where Irish is concerned, 42% of the Catholics would send their children to bilingual playgroups, whereas only 5% of the Protestants would do so.²⁰ When it comes to Irish language signage in public places or buildings, a simple majority of the Protestants would not wish that under any circumstances but a few less would accept it where the majority of people coming into contact would be in favour.²¹

English is the only official national language; Irish and Ulster-Scots were recognised as minority languages in the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.²² Three per cent of the Northern Ireland population used Irish as their first language in the early 1990s.²³

¹⁷ The relevant part is reprinted in Dunn et al. 2001: 60–65.

¹⁸ Dunn et al. 2001: 17.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 17.

²⁰ Ibid.: 18.

²¹ Ibid.: 53.

²² An excerpt of the relevant part is reprinted in Dunn et al. 2001: 59, and Görlach 2000: 13f., fn 1&2.

²³ Mac Giolla Chríost 2002: 446

About 100,000 people are estimated to speak Ulster Scots²⁴, which is also called “Ullans”. As this is an official minority language in Northern Ireland in contrast to (Mainland) Scots in Scotland, funding for Ulster Scots is much higher; the Good Friday Agreement provides a shared supporting procedure by both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland for both recognised Ulster minority languages. Irish (north and south of the border) is funded with some £12 million, 25% from the UK, Ullans gets a £1 million support with £750,000 coming from London.²⁵ For both languages, there are cross-border societies (Foras na Gaeilge for Irish and Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch for Ullans)²⁶, which are eager to restore these two minority languages, especially in writing and performing arts. However it goes along with a certain standardization, particularly in spelling, which Görlach (2000:21) questions:

How acceptable among its speakers are functional extensions into more formal registers (such as administration, education, and the church), or even the codification of written norms? Do speakers really want to have their informal variety standardized—and are others willing to learn it, and for what reasons?

²⁴ I could not find any official data, but Görlach (2000), Horsbroch (2000) and the The Free Dictionary (key word ‘Ulster Scots language’, <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Ulster%20Scots%20language>) give the same figures.

²⁵ Figures taken from Horsbroch 2000: 138.

²⁶ Kirk/Ó Baoill 2000: 3

4 Living Languages Don't Stay As They Are

If standardization is sought, efforts are, in the long run, done in vain. Languages in non-monolingual communities are most liable to natural change. What should be paid attention to in the next ten years is to what extent the languages melt in Northern Ireland, as Irish in the Republic, for example, has adopted much from and left its traces in the English language, especially in the resulting national variety called Hiberno-English, brought about by language melting. Words like *boreen* (from *bóithrín*, a small country road) and *slogan* (from *sluagh-ghairm*, 'war-cry') are loan-words imported to English, the former used only in Ireland, the latter, with an altered meaning, carried on to various other languages, as for instance German. Spelling of some words that are basically restricted to oral use was, in Ireland, adjusted to their Hiberno-English pronunciation: *eejit* ('idiot'), *shite* ('shit'). The Irish *colleen* (from *cailín*) is, just as the Scottish *lassie*, a locally preferred alternative for the term 'girl'.²⁷ And the best item to show how various the English language has become is certainly the spelling of the word derived from Gaelic *uisce beatha*, 'water of life'—'whisky' in Scotland, 'whiskey' in Ireland, 'wysgi' in Wales.

However melting will be unlikely between the languages in Ulster as long as segregation is continued; so this will only come in the long run. Instead the decline in Ireland may have an impact on the Ulster Catholics' attitude to the Irish language.

Another open question is whether there will be effects on neighbouring countries, as minority language activists in Scotland, for example, currently seek legal trilinguality throughout the country, as-it-were an applied, modernized version of what came up in Ireland 100 years ago and now fades.

²⁷ Taken from The Free Dictionary: 'A list of English words of Irish origin.'
<http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/List%20of%20English%20words%20of%20Irish%20origin>

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