

Modern Irish: A Case Study in Language Revival Failure*

*Andrew Carnie,
University of Calgary and University of California, Santa Cruz*

0. Introduction

Modern Irish is very different from the other languages discussed in this volume, in that it is not a language which suffers from poor support: questions on the Irish census about Irish language universally show a strong positive reaction to the revival movement. Nor does the language lack official status; it is, according to the constitution of the Republic of Ireland, the “first language” of the country. There is also widespread political and economic support for the revival effort. The numbers of its speakers is not as low as the number of speakers of many languages; the official estimate of native Irish speakers hovers around the 80,000 mark. It also cannot be said of Irish that there has been a lack of a revival effort. The Irish language revival movement dates back to the beginning of the home-rule movement in the middle of the last century. Finally, it is not a language that is lacking in linguistic description or dictionaries. It is, however, a language which is perhaps at the most critical stage in its history and may very well not survive more than another generation or two.

In this paper, I hope to sketch out some of the history of the Irish language revival movement and of its failure to resurrect the language. I will start out by sketching the history of the language and the various sources of its decline. Then I will present some facts and figures that show that Irish is well on

*The author would like to thank Áine Andrews, John Archibald, Jonathan Bobaljik, David Braun, E.-D. Cook, Eithne Guilfoyle, Ken Hale, Heidi Harley, Becky Kennison, Aodan Mac Póilín, Robert Murray, Robert Pensalfini, Máire Ní Chiosáin, Peter Slomanson, the participants at the MIT workshop on endangered languages, and the participants of my “Structure of Celtic” class at the University of Calgary for their comments and help in preparing this paper; usual disclaimers apply. This work was partially supported by a doctoral fellowship and partly by a post-doctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

its way to death, unless some radical action is taken. I will then turn to the many interrelated reasons for the decline of the language and the failure of the revival movement. Finally, I will offer some words on possible avenues for the future and a few words of hope on what I see as a rapidly changing situation in Ireland today. Perhaps the case of Irish will serve as an example to those linguists starting on their own language revival programs as to what works and what does not work.

I should perhaps preface this discussion with the proviso that I am different from many other authors in the field of Irish language revival. I am not Irish, nor a native speaker of Irish. I am a theoretical linguist, not a language revivalist. My observations herein, then, are primarily that of an interested outsider. I hope this will not detract from their value, however, as I feel I bring a fresh perspective to the issue: that of a person who works on first-language acquisition and syntax of the language. I would like to make it clear from the outset that my criticisms of the Irish language revival movement are not a personal attack on those people who have invested their lives in attempting to preserve, teach, and revitalize this beautiful language. I offer the highest praise to those who have devoted their time and efforts to this worthy cause and thank them for everything their good intentions and good actions have done.

1. The Irish language and its revival movement

In this section, I will briefly discuss a few of the high and low points in the history of the Irish language and its revival movement. This discussion, owing to its length, is clearly not exhaustive; there are many other important events in the history of the language which I have omitted here for reasons of space. For more detailed discussion of the history of the Irish language, see Hindley (1990), Ó Cuív (1969), Greene (1966), and Ó Murchú (1993), among many others.

Modern Irish is a Celtic language spoken today mainly in isolated pockets on the west coast of Ireland. It is closely related to Scots Gaelic and Manx Gaelic and slightly more distantly related to Welsh, Cornish, and Breton.¹

Archaeologists and historical linguists (see, for example, Jackson 1953) date the arrival of (Early) Irish speakers at around 200 BC, possibly arriving from northern Spain. Our first written sources of the language date from the early Christian period (between about 400 and 600 AD). What were the Dark Ages in the rest of Europe was the Golden Age for Irish. At that time, Ireland was the center of learning in Western Europe and the language flourished, with large amounts of literature being written in that time. This was also the expansionist period for the Irish. They set up colonies in Scotland (whose people

¹As an aside, it should be noted that all these languages are either endangered, like Irish, or are already effectively dead (as in Manx and Cornish).

eventually became today's Scots Gaelic speakers) and a similar colony on the Island of Man. In the late Dark Ages, Ireland, like the rest of Europe, was the victim of raids from the Vikings. The Viking invasions mark the appearance of towns in Ireland. For example, Dublin, Galway, Cork, and Waterford were all founded by the Norse. These towns were primarily Norse-speaking and never assimilated to Irish. In 1170, we see the start of the Anglo-Norman invasions of Ireland. The Anglo-Normans conquered large segments of the country, including all the towns. The Anglo-Normans who lived in the countryside quickly became assimilated and learned Irish. Those in the towns, however, did not. Towns and cities, then, became the first place in Ireland that English took hold.

The Statutes of Kilkenny, in 1366, are the first example of official oppression against the Irish language. Irish was banned in the court system and for use in commerce. Later, in the early 16th century, the Tudors attempted to "unify" their realms. Languages other than English were banned during this period. This was, however, generally a failure outside the towns and the Pale (the area near Dublin). The year 1609 marks the start of the plantations of Ireland, starting under the rule of James I. English-speaking Protestant settlers, mainly from Scotland, were settled in the rich farmlands. The largest and most successful of these was the Ulster Plantation. The Irish-speaking Catholics native to the plantation areas were evicted and displaced to less hospitable land. These plantation areas became almost exclusively English-speaking. In 1633, the Cromwellian government cleared much of the Irish-speaking nobility of Leinster and Munster and heavily settled these areas. This plantation was less successful than the Jacobite plantations, however, since by 1700 the Cromwellian settlers had assimilated and started speaking Irish.

The period around 1780 marks the start of the Industrial Revolution in Ireland, primarily centered in the north around Belfast and in the south around Dublin and the Pale. The resultant change in demography and social structure perhaps marks the beginning of the end for the primacy of the Irish language in Ireland. There was in Ireland, as in England, widespread movement of the populous from the countryside to the cities and towns. Not only was the language of the cities and towns English, but so was the technology that brought the people there. There is thus a widespread switch from Irish to English in much of the population. Irish came to be spoken primarily by the peasantry in the countryside.

The 19th century is when the Irish language experienced its greatest decline. A number of factors contributed to this. The Industrial Revolution spread across the country. In the 1840s, the Irish potato famine took its toll on the rural population of Ireland, who were the bulk of the Irish speakers. During this time there was widespread death and emigration, especially among Irish speakers. Emigration was primarily to English-speaking places like Canada, the United States, and Australia, so a whole generation of Irish speakers was lost. In the late 19th century, the republican home-rule movement was growing in strength. The English governmental reaction to this was to suppress Irish culture and language.

The 19th century, however, was also the time when resurgent interest in the language and its revival grew among nonnative speakers. Irish became a symbol of the republican movement. There was also growing interest in the language from linguists, philologists, and folklorists who traveled to the remaining Irish-speaking areas (*gaeltachtaí*) to collect stories and data. The Gaelic League, one of the main promoters of the language revival movement, was founded in 1893. In 1878, it became possible for students to take Irish as a subject for intermediate examination. In 1879, primary schools were finally permitted to teach Irish, but only outside of school hours. In 1900, primary schools were finally allowed to teach Irish inside school hours, but only if they met certain standards. Unfortunately, owing to the poverty and remoteness of many of the *gaeltachtaí*, most schools in Irish-speaking areas did not meet these standards, so English continued to be the only language of instruction in *gaeltacht* schools.

1922 marks the foundation of the Irish Free State and the division of Ireland into two sections (the Free State and Northern Ireland). At this time, schools were required to teach at least one hour of Irish each day. Soon after this division, the Irish civil war broke out in the south. This conflict was particularly divisive in the language revival movement. Language revivalists were found on both sides of the war, so little progress was made during that period. In 1937, Irish was officially declared the south's "first language" in the constitution. With this, the language revival movement received perhaps its greatest level of official and public support.

Many authors, however, feel that, despite this support, the language is still in irreparable decline. In the next section we will take a quick look at these authors' claims.

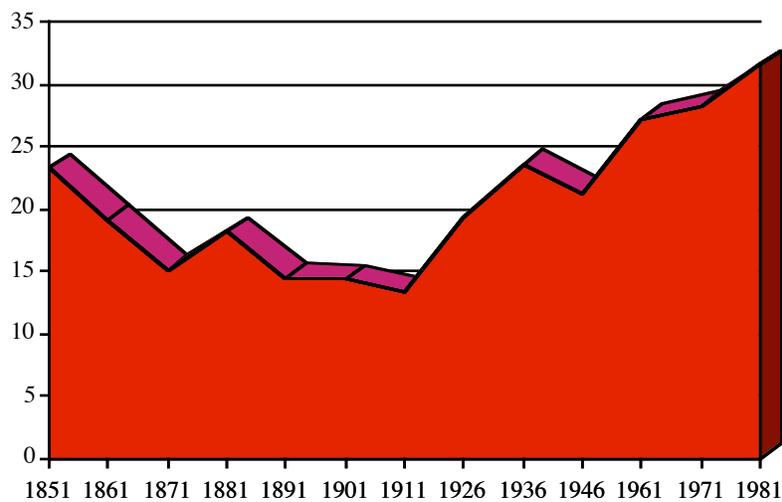
2. The Irish language in decline: some facts and figures

One of the most troubling facts about the Irish language revival movement is that despite a general increase in population in the nation as a whole, the number of Irish speakers and the amount they use the language have declined considerably. This information is not necessarily reflected in gross numbers of speakers. Consider the figures in (1) and the corresponding graph in (2), based on censuses conducted by the British and Irish governments. This data is taken from Hindley (1990).

1)

Year	# Co. ²	Population	Irish Only	%	Total Irish	%
1841	32	8,175,124	--	--	--	--
1851	32	6,522,265	319,602	4.9	1,524,286	23.3
1861	32	5,798,564	163,275	2.8	1,105,546	19.1
1871	32	5,412,377	103,562	1.9	817,875	15.1
1881	32	5,174,836	64,167	1.2	949,932	18.2
1891	32	4,704,750	38,121	0.8	680,174	14.5
1901	32	4,458,775	20,953	0.5	641,142	14.4
	26	3,221,823	---	---	619,710	19.2
1911	32	4,390,319	---	---	582,446	13.3
	26	3,139,688	---	---	553,717	17.6
1926	26	2,971,992	---	---	540,802	19.3
1936	26	2,806,925	---	---	666,601	23.7
1946	26	2,771,657	---	---	588,725	21.2
1961	26	2,635,818	---	---	716,420	27.2
1971	26	2,787,448	---	---	789,429	28.3
1981	26	3,226,467	---	---	1,018,413	31.6

2)



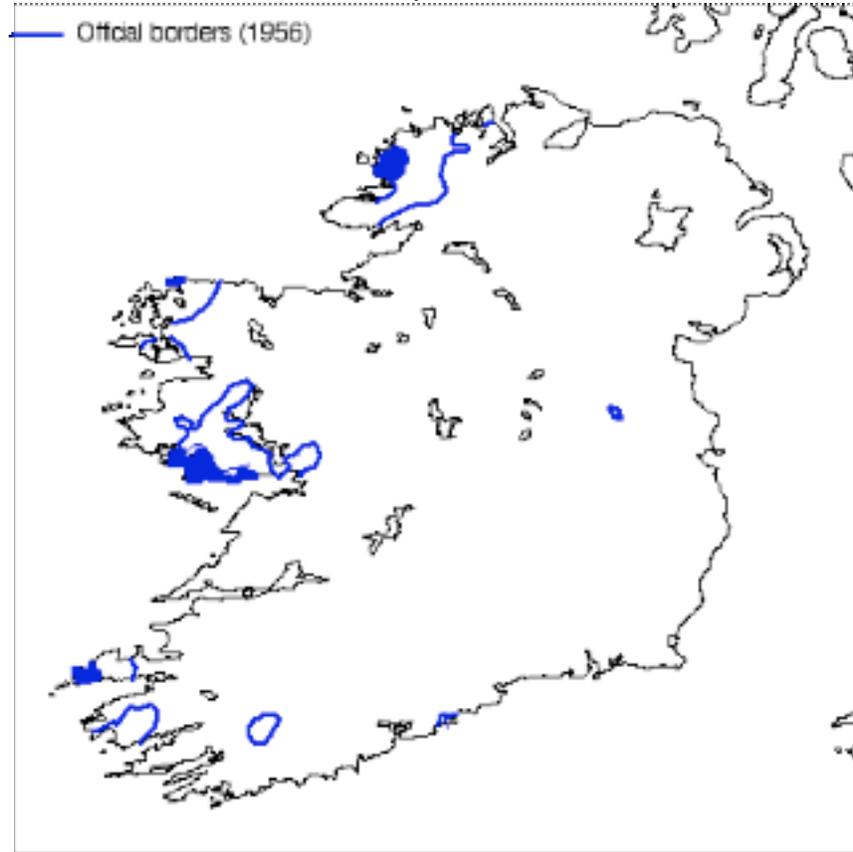
At first glance, as many in the Irish language movement would like to have us believe, there seems to be generally positive increase in the numbers of people claiming to be Irish speakers, rising from a low of 13.3% at the turn of the century to almost a third of the population (31%) in 1981. These figures, as

²This figure refers to the number of counties included in the census: 32 before the division of the country and 26 afterwards (that is, excluding the six counties of Northern Ireland).

noted by, among others, Hindley (1990), however, are highly suspect. Let us consider what these numbers actually represent. The language question on the Irish census are primarily “self-reporting”; that is, people are asked whether they are Irish-speaking or not. There is no clear definition of what it means to be an “Irish speaker.” This could mean anything from having taken a few lessons in school to being a fluent native speaker. There is no objective standard as to what it means to be a speaker of the language for the purposes of the census. These percentages, then, are probably grossly inflated.

Hindley (1990) is highly critical of the claims that Irish is on its way to recovery (however, for a contrasting view, see Ó Ciosáin [1991]). He has two specific claims. First, that the number of native speakers of the language (that is, people for whom Irish is learned as a first language or is learned simultaneously with English as a first language) is very low. Second, he claims that geographic regions in which Irish is spoken on an everyday basis are much smaller than the official *gaeltacht* regions. This is seen in the following map. This map is based on Hindley’s; however, it lacks Hindley’s accuracy as I, unlike Hindley, am not a professional geographer. This map, then, is impressionistic, and the boundaries shown on it should not be taken literally. For more precise maps, see Hindley. Black areas mark the Fíor-Gaeltachtaí (true Irish-speaking areas, where Irish is spoken 80% of the time or more). Thick lines demark the government’s official (1956) borders of the Irish-speaking areas.

3) *Gaeltachtaí* (1987), based on Hindley (1990)



As can be seen from the above map, the actual area in which Irish is a living language is very small. Further, the reader should note that all the Irish-speaking regions are highly geographically remote from large population centers and are themselves among the most sparsely populated parts of the country. This is less than positive for the status of the language.

Hindley's figures are based primarily upon the numbers of students in school who are annually awarded the *deontas*, a monetary award given to *gaeltacht* students who show competence in the language to an educational inspector.³ Some authors (for example, Ó Ciosáin [1991]) have argued that *deontas*-based statistics are skewed in the opposite direction to the government statistics (that is, they are overly pessimistic). However, I think, without a doubt, even if overly pessimistic, they are more reflective of the actual status of the language than the census facts. It is also consistent with Ó Siadhail's (1989)

³The *deontas* is considered highly patronizing by many native speakers of the language and its status is highly controversial.

approximation that there are fewer than 30,000 native Irish speakers now living in the *gaeltachtaí*.

This is given some support by my own personal experience as a visitor to the *gaeltachtaí*. Despite the *gaeltachtaí*'s official status as Irish-speaking, one is as likely to hear English spoken there as Irish (in public places at least).⁴ As a theoretical linguist who uses native-speaker consultants, I am constantly surprised at how few native speakers there are who can serve this role. The language of commerce is without a doubt English, even between native speakers. While in Dingle in County Kerry, which is on the border with the Corca Dhuibhne *gaeltacht*, I was having a late-night snack in a fish-and-chip shop. An elderly man entered and conversed with the woman behind the counter in Irish, mainly passing the time of day. When his order was complete, the language of the conversation switched to English for the purposes of the monetary exchange. Once he had been given change, they resumed their conversation in Irish until the gentleman left. I can honestly say that I was constantly surprised at how little Irish was spoken between locals in the various *gaeltacht* areas, even when they did not know I was listening.

3. Reasons for the decline and the failure of the revival

In this section I will briefly review some of the reasons for the decline of the Irish language and for the failure of its revival movement. This section is based primarily on Hindley (1990), but is peppered with my own impressions where appropriate.

Without a doubt, emigration from Irish-speaking regions has been and continues to be a major problem for the revival movement and the survival of the language. In the last century, as mentioned above in section 1, there was widespread emigration from the rural Irish-speaking areas. This has continued to this day. A visitor to the *gaeltacht* today will be surprised at how few young (Baby Boomers or Generation X) people there are.⁵ There is a definite greying of the *gaeltacht*. Most young people flee to the larger English-speaking cities of Ireland or to North America and Australia. This is, without a doubt, due in turn to the economic weakness of the *gaeltachtaí*. The *gaeltachtaí* are physically remote and tend to have fairly poor land and natural resources.⁶ They are mainly

⁴More discussion of this fact is found in section 3 below.

⁵This is a situation which will be familiar to those who have worked on Native reserves and reservations in Canada and the United States. The comparison of the *gaeltachtaí* to Native reservations is one that is very easily made. See, for example, Ó Tuama (1964).

⁶Other than their status as tourist areas, of course.

farming communities and have relatively little industrialization.⁷ Unemployment is very high. For many young people, English is viewed as a kind of economic liberator. Speaking English well benefits the young person in his or her quest for a job outside the *gaeltacht*, where the bulk of jobs are to be found.

On the flipside of the emigration issue is the amount of monolingual English immigration into the *gaeltachtaí*. Often when an Irish speaker goes away to university or for employment, he or she will meet a spouse who is a monolingual English speaker. Should this couple decide to return to the *gaeltacht*, the language of the home will be, obviously, the language both people can speak: English. Needless to say, since English is the prestige language of Ireland (for reasons to be discussed below), their children will also become English speakers. Similarly, we find English immigration due to the industrialization projects. In the development of highly technical industries, it is often the case that outside native English-speaking managers and technical advisors come in to assist in the project. Since these people have relatively high status and are outsiders, the language in these environments naturally shifts towards English. A related problem has to do with the fact that technical material (for example, computer manuals) to do with these projects is very often monolingually English. Another example of widespread English immigration into the *gaeltacht* for economic reasons comes from the tourist industry. The Gaeltacht Industrialization Agency (Údarás na Gaeltachta) has opened several *ceardlann* (craft centers) in the *gaeltachtaí*. These craft centers are meant to provide local artisans and artists who specialize in traditional craftwork with a place to sell their wares to tourists. Although these are primarily restricted to Irish speakers, these have started a boom in craft stores throughout the *gaeltacht* regions. Unfortunately, the unofficial craft centers have widely attracted artists and artisans from outside the *gaeltacht*. I was surprised to discover in a knitting and Aran sweater store near Ros Múc, in the heart of the Conamara *gaeltacht*, that the woman behind the counter did not speak a word of Irish.

On a related note, there are also widespread transient English-speaking populations which annually invade the *gaeltachtaí*. Some of Ireland's most spectacular scenery is to be found in the Irish-speaking regions. Tourists, most of whom are English-speaking, provide the bulk of the economy in these regions. For obvious reasons, then, the language of service people and others who have interaction with the public is primarily English. For reasons of politeness, it is often the case that two Irish speakers will converse in English if there is an English speaker nearby. This clearly takes its toll on the language. This brings us to one of the most spectacular failures in the Irish language revival program. Each year, thousands of English-speaking school-aged children are sent to language immersion programs at "Gaelic colleges" throughout the *gaeltachtaí*, in an attempt to make them fluent and familiar with the language.

⁷To be fair, there is a branch of the Irish government which is devoted to increasing the economic strength and industrialization of the *gaeltachtaí*: Údarás na Gaeltachta. So far, however, its successes, although promising, have been limited.

This has backfired terribly. By forcing an annual infusion of thousands of English speakers who are reluctant and resistant to the Irish language, the Irish speakers are both outnumbered and overwhelmed; English quickly becomes the language of use outside the colleges. A perfect example of this is in Ceathrú Rua in Conamara, which is the locus of one the largest of the Gaelic colleges; during the summer months, one is hard pressed to hear anything but English in its streets.

The fact of the matter is that there are simply too few Irish speakers and too few environments where Irish is a language which is to be preferred to English.⁸ For many “outward-looking” Irish speakers, Irish is viewed as a “useless” language. Very few people both inside and outside of Ireland speak it; international commerce and trade are much more likely to be conducted in English. Although a certain number of degrees are now available through the medium of Irish at the University College Galway and there is a new business program at the City University of Dublin taught through Irish, these are the exceptions to the rule. English is viewed by most Irish people as the language of education and learning. The view of Irish as a useless language is exacerbated by a number of factors. There is very little scholarly, technological, or technical material written in the language. Most Irish publication today seems to me to consist mostly of poetry and traditional stories.⁹ This is consistent with the fact that, for many people, unfortunately including many governmental officials, Irish is viewed as a tongue for formal or ceremonial purposes only (that is, for inscriptions on monuments) rather than a language for everyday use. This gives rise to widespread linguistic tokenism. For example, road signs in Ireland are bilingual Irish/English, yet there has been no real attempt to push for the language to be used in other realms outside of the *gaeltacht*.¹⁰ I strongly suspect that even native Irish speakers generally ignore the token Irish on the signage and read the English translation.

A related problem to language tokenism has to do with general linguistic attitudes towards Irish. Historically, especially among plantation populations and among people in the city, Irish was viewed as a peasant’s language. Being heard to speak Irish was to be marked as an uneducated and poor peasant. We often hear tales of how Irish was “beaten” out of children in the middle of the last century. This situation is strongly reminiscent of religious missionaries of the last century. Where the missionary in Africa, ignorant of the

⁸The obvious exceptions to this claim are when Irish speakers wish to say something secretly or discrete from tourist ears or among close family members. Even in these contexts, there is a tendency to use Irish only when speaking to older family members. For example, among the children of an Irish-speaking family I know in Dublin, they tend to use English among themselves and only use Irish to their parents. This is especially surprising since the whole family, both parents and children, have been widely influential in the language revival movement.

⁹See section 4 below for some important exceptions to this generalization.

¹⁰For a contrasting view, see the Oifig and tSoláthair (1965) *Athbeochan na Gaeilge*. and An Coimisiún um Athbheochan na Gaeilge (1963) *Summary of Final Report*.

culture of people he was dealing with, went to convert the “poor pagans” to Christianity, the teacher in Ireland went to cure the Gael of their “ignorant” and “barbaric” tongue. The result was devastating to language: Irish became highly stigmatized and speaking it carried a strong negative connotation. This attitude, although somewhat counteracted by the association of the language with republicanism and national pride, continues to this day for many people. There is another kind of negative stigma associated with Irish, however, and that comes from the educational system. Until the 1970s, in order to get a higher-learning certificate in Ireland, students had to pass an exam in Irish. This, coupled with exceedingly bad pedagogical methods in the teaching of Irish, has resulted in widespread resentment of the language among people who were forced to take it in school. In my own experience, practically every nonnative speaker I talked to, upon discovering that I was studying the language, would tell me about their experience with it in school and how much they hated the language because of it. The widespread opinion, it seems, is that although in principle they support the revival of the language for political reasons, Irish English speakers themselves want nothing to do with the revival personally. They have absolutely no desire to learn the language at all. On the other side of the coin, however, is the general resentment of Irish speakers to outsider language revivalists and linguists (like myself), who are viewed with suspicion since, in a sense, it is not our battle. For many native speakers, language revivalists from outside the *gaeltacht* are viewed as radicals or, worse yet, as cultural pirates and thieves. To a certain extent, then, the language revival movement has suffered from internal resistance and strife.

Apart from these attitudinal difficulties, there are several problems inherent to Irish that have given rise to failure for the language. First, we have the problem that the *gaeltachtaí* are fairly widely spaced from one another, so there is little inter-*gaeltacht* interaction. There is also somewhat of a lack of a social continuity among Irish speakers. This in turn has led to the somewhat problematic situation that there are essentially three very distinct dialects. This can be seen in the fact that each of the three dialects has a different name for the language itself. In the northern Ulster dialect spoken in County Donegal, the name is [gal'k']. In the Connacht dialect (spoken mainly in Conamara), the name is [gel'g']. Finally, in the southern Munster dialect, the name is [gel'N']. This is reflective of the fact that the three dialects are widely different in their lexicons, their syntaxes, and their phonologies. There is no prestige dialect among them. There is a government-defined official standard (the *Caighdeán*);¹¹ however, it does not really approximate any of the individual dialects, so native speakers tend to avoid it and label it as “artificial.” From the perspective of teaching the language to people living outside the *gaeltacht*, this causes problems. Learners must either learn an artificial standard or choose to identify themselves with one particular dialect. To make matters worse, there is the public perception that Irish is a “difficult” language to learn. This is in part

¹¹The *Caighdeán* focuses mainly on a standard spelling, grammar, and morphology. In terms of phonology, a standard pronunciation has been developed by Prof. Dónall Ó Baoill (see, for example, Ó Baoill [1986]) but has not yet received official sanction.

based upon the fact that its spelling system is very different from that of many of the more common European languages, and its VSO syntax is somewhat exotic in the context of languages like English, French, and German. Exotic and unfamiliar should not, however, translate to “difficult.” Irish is, like all other languages, easily learnable with the appropriate amount of input and practice. Perceptions about the difficulty of the language, however, have caused many people to avoid the revival movement entirely, thus giving rise, in part, to the current situation.

Perhaps the highest blame that can be assigned for the failure of the language and its revival can be firmly placed with the language revivalists themselves. Despite obvious good intentions, some remarkably bad policy decisions have been made. Probably the biggest problem for the revival movement has been in putting the burden on the educational system, rather than in promoting the usefulness of the language in everyday life. Children were expected to learn Irish in school, and this was supposed to revive the language. Not only did this create widespread resentment towards the language, it is a remarkably naïve view of language learning, as first noted by Slomanson (1994).¹² It equates language learning to the learning of math or geography or history. As linguists, we know that this is simply not the case. Language is not a “subject” that can be taught formally in an hour a day. Rather, language learning is a subconscious cognitive system that requires maturation and constant and consistent input. We as linguists know, but the revivalists in Ireland did not, that language is acquired, rather than learned. This naïveté with respect to what constitutes how we acquire language was compounded over and over again by the systematically poor pedagogical methods and materials that were used to “teach” the language. Lessons in Irish consisted, until quite recently, of translation exercises and reading of texts. Little or no work was put into conversation language practice and use. As noted by Ó Tuama (1964), until quite recently Irish teachers did not even have to have taken Irish in their degree. It is no wonder, then, that the emphasis on schooling in the language was an abject failure. It is fairly clear that in order to revive a language, emphasis has to be placed on usage in the home and in the general community rather than isolating it in the educational system. Unfortunately, there has been little progress in this area. We find that Irish suffers wherever there is language competition. When services of any kind are available in both languages, especially outside the *gaeltacht*, it is usually the case that the English is of a better quality, is better funded, and is more frequently used. For example, although there are a few Irish language newspapers, they tend to be of “tabloid”

¹²I am radically oversimplifying Slomanson's analysis here, perhaps to the point of misrepresentation. In fact, Slomanson argues against people who lay the entire blame on the educational system. His position, as discussed below in section 4.1, is more precisely that a certain degree of Irish monolingualism in an English-predominant social situation like that found in Ireland today is crucial for the actual transmission of the language through natural means. When it comes to pedagogical concerns, this means that the teaching of Irish as a subject, rather than teaching other subjects through the medium of Irish, and the predominant use of Irish in other social situations will not result in language revival.

status, rather than examples of high-quality journalism. Since all speakers of Irish are bilingual, it is the case that when offered a choice of services in both languages, the English is usually better, so they choose to use the English. This is an area in which funding from governmental sources could easily make a difference. There is also a remarkable lack of mass media available in the language. There is no Irish language television station, and what Irish television is available on the English stations tends to be targeted at older native speakers, rather than at the younger generations who are the next step in continuing the survival of the language. Furthermore, what shows are available tend to be shown at less than desirable hours, often competing with more popular (and better funded) English language shows. There are two Irish language radio stations: *Radió na Life* and *Radió na Gaeltachta*. Both play a very important role in maintaining the language, but the burden cannot be placed on two radio stations alone! Although there are several publishers¹³ working very hard at producing a wide variety of interesting Irish language material, it is still the case that Irish language print material cannot compete with English. There simply are more books published in English; those books tend to be better and more professionally produced and, because of their wide distribution and popularity, are significantly cheaper than Irish books.

4. Solutions and examples to others

4.1 Solutions?

It is clearly the case, then, that a myriad of problems have hindered the Irish language and its revival. We have social pressure, bad attitudes, poor planning, geographic concerns, and monetary concerns all interacting to conspire against the language. The influence of English is so overwhelming that it is not clear in what contexts Irish would ever be used if the majority of Irish could be convinced to become functionally bilingual. What is the solution to the problem? To be frank, I'm not sure that there is one. Slomanson (1994) proposes that the solution lies in monolingual communities committed to the maintenance of the language by creating environments where Irish and only Irish is used, thus ensuring transmission to the next generation. While from the perspective of a linguist, this makes the most sense to me of any of the proposals I have heard, it is not clear to me that it is necessarily a feasible one from a social point of view. I am not convinced that there are enough people willing to make an isolationist move simply to maintain or revive the language. Recall that the whole of Ireland is currently bombarded by English language material from both within the country and without. In my view it would be almost impossible to create a monolingual community at this time without a radical shift in demographics. In fact, I suspect that most Irish people are sufficiently selfish that no matter how much they care about the language, they would be unwilling to make this sacrifice.

¹³Of particular note are Cló Iar-Chonnachta and An Gúm.

It should be noted that an attempt at an all-Irish language community in Belfast (Maguire 1991) has met with a small amount of success, but with two interesting developments. This community, although entirely Irish-speaking itself, is surrounded by an English-speaking community (which is sometimes very hostile, for political reasons). For this reason, there are strong English pressures on the language of the children. The Irish these children seem to have learned deviates in many striking ways from the Irish of other native speakers,¹⁴ suggesting that English has had a very strong influence on their speech. Second, many of the children in this community, as well as others in Republic who have been raised monolingually in Irish, resent what has been forced on them, so they rebel and refuse to speak Irish. Slomanson's idea, then, while initially appealing, may well backfire.

It strikes me, then, that while it is clear that Irish cannot survive under pressure from English in a bilingual situation, it is also clear that a monolingualist approach is not necessarily viable either. What, then, is the solution for dying and endangered languages? I'm sad to admit that I'm not sure that there is one; it may well be the case that unless there is widespread and social change and upheaval (that is, revolution or war or mass immigration¹⁵) which changes demographics, there is little hope in language revival.

Rather than end on this somewhat negative note, I'd like to consider two additional themes. First, I'd like to ask whether there is anything that has come out of the Irish language revival movement that can be of use to those planning revivals for other languages. Then, second, I'd like to ask whether, aside from the negative prediction of the above paragraph, there is any hope for Irish.

4.2 *What can others learn from the Irish language revival movement?*

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from Irish is the one stressed above: language is not a subject that can be taught in schools effectively. For a language to be revived, it must be made relevant for use in a wide variety of contexts, including, but not exclusively, schools. It must be the necessary language (that is, another, more accessible or prestigious language cannot be available as an option) and, following Slomanson (1994), it must be spoken in such a way and in such a quantity that children of language-acquiring age can learn it. Irish also shows that language attitudes are very important and, where changeable, should be the initial focus of the revival movement. Finally, money should be invested in the most glossy and appealing forms of mass media available. In particular, these media should be aimed at people of parenting age

¹⁴For example, they seem to have lost the traditional distinction between the two copular verbs of the language, *Is* and *Tá*, and have lost the grammaticalized initial consonant mutations. See Maguire (1991) for more details.

¹⁵As in the case of the successful revival of Hebrew in Israel.

and younger and should be not only accessible but entertaining and interesting as well.

Among the bright spots that shine through the gloom of section 3 above, we can note that several truly progressive innovations have been made in the last ten years or so in the Irish revival movement. For example, An Gúm and Cló Iar-chonnachta, two Irish language presses, have made available technical dictionaries to allow the translation of technical material into the language and have also produced a large number of high-quality and appealing children's books and adult novels. This kind of material is clearly essential to any successful revival movement. On a similar note, Gunn Everson Teo has recently developed several Irish language video games which are sure to put a positive angle on learning the language and which make way for viewing the language as a useful medium. Finally, in contrast with the translation exercises of yesterday's language instruction books, several new textbooks, including de Bháil's (1990) *Beart is Briathar*, have made learning the language as a second language less of a chore than it was before. I suspect that the ambitious language revivalist working on another language will find in all these innovations important models.

4.3 *Is there hope for Irish?*

In section 4.1 above, I produced the negative conclusion that there is no solution to the problem of language revival without widespread demographic change. Is it the case, then, that Irish and languages like it are doomed? Not necessarily. In the summers of 1994 and 1995, I made two research trips to Ireland to attend conferences, gather data, and take small vacations. On my second trip, I saw a remarkable improvement in the status of the Irish language. I heard Irish spoken where I would never have expected to have heard it before: I heard it spoken by spectators at a hurling¹⁶ match in Dublin. I also heard it spoken in a music store in the English-speaking town of Killarny. Further, I heard it spoken more frequently and regularly in the *gaeltachtaí* than I had the year before. To give a concrete example, while sitting in a bar in the town of An Spideal in the Conamara, I heard five youths aged between 18 and 25 talking in Irish. This is especially surprising for two reasons. First was the age of the participants: if there is any age group which is likely to conduct itself in English, this is it. Second, An Spideal is a highly touristed town with a high percentage of English speakers. The social pressure to speak English in a public place like this bar is enormous. The fact that this conversation was happening by this age group in this environment struck me as nothing less than remarkable. Why did I notice this significant change in language usage in one year's time? I believe the solution lies in a national change in attitude. As pointed out to me by both Irish and English speakers, there has been a recent upsurge in pride about things Irish. Instead of abandoning their culture in order to assimilate more effectively into the larger context of Europe, the Irish seem to

¹⁶Hurling, similar to field hockey, is a popular sport in Ireland.

be holding up certain aspects of their culture as unique. The causes of this change are unclear to me, but may well be due to the increased stature of Ireland in the European community and to the improved relations between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. On top of the linguistic pride, one can see this change of attitude in other aspects of Irish culture. For example, the traditional-modern Irish dance show "Riverdance" is touring London and New York in the coming year. The idea of an Irish step-dance show on Broadway would have struck most Irish people as ludicrous only a year ago. Irish people seem genuinely more proud of their culture than they were a few years ago. What, then, does this shift in national attitude have to do with the Irish language and its revival movement? Well, if it continues, then it may well serve in *lieu* of a demographic shift. More people will be proud of and display their Irish language skills. This in turn will lead to more awareness of, more use of and, by extension, more acquisition of the language.

Selected References

- de Bhál, Pól (1990) *Beart is Briathar*, An Cló Ceilteach. Dublin.
- Ó Baoill, Dónall (1986) *Lárchanúint don Ghaeilge*, Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann. Dublin.
- Ó Ciosáin, Éamon. (1991) *Buried Alive: A Reply to Reg Hindley's "The Death of the Irish Language"*, Dáil Uí Chadhain. Dublin.
- An Coimisiún um Athbeochan na Gaeilge (1963) *Summary, in English, of Final Report*, Dublin Stationary Office. Dublin.
- Ó Cuív, Brian (1969) *A View of the Irish Language*, Dublin Stationary Office. Dublin.
- Greene, David (1966) *The Irish Language*, Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland. Dublin.
- Hindley, Reg (1990) *The Death of the Irish Language*, Routledge. London.
- Jackson, Kenneth (1953) *Language and History in Early Britain*, University of Edinburgh Press. Edinburgh.
- Maguire, Gabrielle (1991) *Our Own Language*, Multilingual Matters. London.
- Ó Murchú, Máirtín (1993) "Aspects of the Societal Status of Modern Irish." In Ball (ed) *The Celtic Languages*, Routledge. London.
- Oifig an tSoláthair (1965) *Athbeochan na Gaeilge/The Restoration of the Irish Language*, Dublin Stationary Office. Dublin.
- Ó Siadhail, Mícheál (1989) *Modern Irish: Grammatical Structure and Dialectal Variation*, Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

Slomanson, Peter (1994) “Athbheochan nó Meath? Míniú ar Fhailí na hAthbheochana go dtí Seo”. Paper presented at the Language in Ireland Conference, University of Ulster. Jordanstown.

Ó Tuama, Seán (1964) *Facts about Irish*, An Comhar Poiblí. Cork.