Sustaining Linguistic Diversity

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Sustaining Linguistic Diversity: Endangered and Minority Languages and Language Varieties.

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CURRENT PERSPECTIVES on language policy suggest that, in order to be effective, governmental planning efforts must be consistent with a given community’s language practices and beliefs along with other contextual forces that are in play (Spolsky 2004) and that official language policies make up only one aspect of what is often a deeply rooted system of overt and covert practices and beliefs of both government bodies and community members (Shohamy 2006). This chapter reports on a three-and-a-half-year-long survey of members of a specific community in the Irish Gaeltacht to determine how language revitalization efforts by the state have affected the language practices of community members. This study draws attention to a mismatch between Irish national language policy and the apparent language policy of a Gaeltacht community with regard to Official Standard Irish and its role in language revitalization and analyzes the ways in which government policies—specifically the development of a national standard for the language—have paradoxically affected the language in the Múscraí Gaeltacht region.

Since its foundation in 1922, the Irish state has sought to influence the belief systems in Irish-speaking communities, which had experienced a massive language shift from Irish to English. The focus has been on both Irish language attitudes and usage patterns. The goals of state planning efforts have been concentrated on reversing the declining use of Irish as the primary community language and revitalizing it for use both by the traditional community of speakers and as a fit medium for all the needs of a modern state. The strengthening of the status of Irish in the speaker community and the expansion of its domains of usage nationally has thus always been a fundamental pillar of the Irish national language ideology, although the practice of formulating specific language policies has varied in scope and application through time. The national ideological commitment to Irish revival is particularly clear in language in education policies from the 1920s and 1930s, including making Irish compulsory in primary schools as well as for the postprimary Leaving Certificate (Kelly 2002, 18). A move toward Irish medium education nationally in the first thirty years of statehood meant that just under one-third of schools were teaching through
Irish only by the late 1930s. When this number peaked in the 1950s, a further one-fourth of schools were teaching some subjects through the Irish medium (Ó Riagáin 1997, 16).

The cultivation of the Irish language in the Gaeltacht population served as a resource to fuel the national policy. One policy initiative that shows this clearly was the establishment from 1927 to 1960 of dedicated secondary schools, Coláistí Ull-mhúcháin (preparative colleges) in the Gaeltacht. These schools fed the primary teacher training colleges so that up to 50 percent of trainees should be native Irish speakers (Kelly 2002, 69), which was hugely disproportionate to the number of native Irish speakers in the general population. National language policy, as experienced in the ideology behind legislation but also as a manifestation of majority public opinion, differs subtly from Gaeltacht community policy in the mechanisms of language management employed. When there are mismatches, often unseen but with potentially conflictual consequences, the national policy has always had the stronger position.

National Language Policy and the Gaeltacht

There have been a number of distinct periods of national language policy since the 1920s, which can be tracked by changes in the state’s practice with regard to educational planning and provision, Gaeltacht administration structures, and Irish language broadcasting in particular, all of which reflect both government politics and majority public opinion on these questions (Ó hIfearnáin 2000). The state’s early language ideology was rooted in national language revivalism, and so official responsibility for the Gaeltacht and language questions was dispersed throughout all departments of government and state agencies. While departments that physically had a presence in the Gaeltacht, such as the ministries responsible for agriculture, fisheries, and forestry, were particularly concerned with language issues, the brief included all areas of government activity, especially the national departments of education and of finance.

1926–1956

As a result of the Gaeltacht Commission’s report of 1926, the government recognized areas where approximately 80 percent or more of the population spoke Irish as being fíor-Ghaeltacht (true Gaeltacht). It was intended that these areas should be administered through Irish alone and that all education would also be in Irish only. Surrounding areas where Irish was spoken by more than 25 percent of the population were called breac-Ghaeltacht (partial Gaeltacht), where administration and education was to be developed rapidly toward Irish-medium provision. The rest of the country was an area targeted for full language revival rather than language preservation and development. The underlying ideology was one of a belief in language revitalization at the national level, with more or less specific plans according to the presence of Irish as a community language at the local level. These geographic divisions were not meant to be set in stone but to change in favor of Irish, the breac-Ghaeltacht and the rest of the country to become fíor-Ghaeltacht in the course of time.
1956–Present

A full Department of the Gaeltacht, Roinn na Gaeltachta, was set up in 1956. Since then the administration and development of the Gaeltacht has been the direct responsibility of a named government ministry, currently a major division of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. A dedicated state development authority, Údarás na Gaeltachta (The Gaeltacht Authority), was created in 1979. Until it became the remit of a particular ministry, the Gaeltacht was geographically defined in a loose yet potentially dynamic way.

Extracting the Gaeltacht from national language policy and defining it for the focused language management purposes of a named government ministry in 1956 was not a simple task. As the result of policy being dispersed to all areas of government, in the course of the thirty years between the report of the Gaeltacht Commission (1926) and the setting up of the ministry for the Gaeltacht, a multitude of definitions of the Gaeltacht had evolved. A memorandum prepared for the government dated January 19, 1956 (National Archives, Department of the Taoiseach, S15811A), suggests that as many as twelve different understandings of where the Gaeltacht was to be found were in circulation at the time, from the first official usage that is contained in the Local Offices and Appointments (Gaeltacht) Order, 1928, through various acts on housing, school meals, vocational education, to the different operating structures of the Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces. The Gaeltacht was only first officially defined in 1956 by the Gaeltacht Areas Order (Statutory Instrument no. 245/1956) for the purpose of giving Roinn na Gaeltachta a precise geographical definition of its operational area.

The Gaeltacht Areas Order is based on the townland as a unit, being the traditional rural land division that most of the population recognize, and lists these as whole or parts of the smallest administrative areas used by the state, the district electoral divisions, as “determined to be Gaeltacht areas for the purposes of the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act, 1956 (No. 21 of 1956),” being the act that set up the Gaeltacht ministry. Although public opinion in Ireland generally assumes that the Gaeltacht was defined as those areas where Irish was the primary community language, this definition is hard to sustain under close examination. Indeed, although the reason for existence of the Gaeltacht as a statutory area is linguistic, from 1956 it was far from being an exclusively Irish-speaking or even bilingual community. The area it encompassed contains many townlands where Irish was certainly spoken but as a minority language.

The Gaeltacht area, so defined, was a result of a special language census of households that were deemed to be in the Gaeltacht in 1956 by one or more of the dozen or so definitions that had been identified as being in use. This special census, basically a report by the house to house enumerators who collected the general census of population forms that year, was then further verified by selected reexamination visits by three specially selected school inspectors and further referral to government experts. The original draft of the Gaeltacht map (available in the National Archives) prepared on September 8, 1956, included core areas where Irish speakers were in a clear majority, typically surrounded by larger areas that were recommended to be kept under review for potential inclusion. As such, the proposed
definition of the Gaeltacht prepared internally for the government already recognized that language ideology and management were the driving forces in describing the Gaeltacht rather than the more objective criteria of actual language ability and practice. When the government’s order was enacted, on September 21, 1956, nearly all the “potential areas” were included, as were some contiguous townlands that had not previously even been considered for possible inclusion. The only exclusions from the original draft were isolated townlands where Irish was observed to have been spoken as a native language but that were not contiguous to core Gaeltacht areas, a fact that further confirms the Gaeltacht boundaries to be driven by policy for area language management, or the intention to develop such plans rather than being simply linguistic reservations for the management of a residual bilingual population.

**Ideologies behind the Mapping of the Gaeltacht**

The inclusion of the linguistically peripheral areas was not entirely cynical or illogical. Most of the secondary schools were located in these areas, as they tended to be in the villages and small towns that were population centers where the English language had made most advances since the mid-nineteenth century. Equally, inclusion of such areas meant that many parishioners were not separated from their churches, and sports fields and other amenities remained within the jurisdiction of the Gaeltacht and so could benefit from subsidy and improvement as amenities for the Irish-speaking population. All this sought to maintain the rural communities to which the Irish-speaking communities belonged and to bring them under one government ministry responsible for their economic and social development, which were seen as the primary contexts for linguistic preservation and expansion. The central, though slightly ambiguous status of Irish as a community language, particularly in the geographical margins of the core Gaeltacht areas, was confirmed by the wording used by the government when further extending the Gaeltacht boundary to some adjacent areas in 1967, 1974, and 1982 (Statutory Instruments 200/1967, 192/1974, and 350/1982): “Whereas the areas specified in the Schedule to this Order are substantially Irish speaking areas or areas contiguous thereto which, in the opinion of the Government, ought to be included in the Gaeltacht with a view to preserving and extending the use of Irish as a vernacular language.”

The emphasis is plainly on the Gaeltacht as a planning area where Irish is to be preserved and extended, even to areas that are contiguous to areas where it is spoken by a substantial part of the population.

The official Gaeltacht thus has a complex relationship with Irish. It contains regions where Irish is still a major, if not entirely dominant, community language and others where Irish is only the first language of a very small percentage of the local population. Gaeltacht community language policy, being the people’s beliefs about and practices with regard to Irish, to English, to bilingualism, and to language questions generally, and specifically the status and roles of the languages, is a multifaceted combination of the national process of language shift toward English that has taken place, the communities’ own conscious or accidental bucking of the trend, and the region’s position as the target of specific language policies since the foundation of the Irish state. Although both the local communities of the Gaeltacht and the
The majority of the Irish public have as a common goal the preservation and promotion of Irish, an analysis of several aspects of state policy reveals a divergence between the language policy of the local speech communities and that of the national collective (i.e., the state and majority public opinion), particularly with regard to the role and form of the standard national language and to the practice of bilingualism at home and school (Ó hIfearnáin 2007). As a result of underlying differences in language ideology, these subtle mismatches between the de facto language policy of many Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht and the rest of the population may have actually reinforced the pattern of linguistic decline in a covert way, in Shohamy’s (2006) terms, counter to the apparent desires of community and state. The following discussion is based on the hypothesis that positive language development in the Gaeltacht and throughout the nation requires consensus between language planners and individual community members on the cultivation of the linguistic ambitions of speakers and potential speakers of Irish and on the target variety or varieties of the language that can be cultivated for this purpose. The discussion is based on fieldwork between the summer of 2000 and the spring of 2004 in the Múscraí Gaeltacht region in the southwestern province of Munster and an analysis of the ideology behind the official standard language, an Caighdeán Oifigiúil.

The Múscraí Gaeltacht Study

Múscraí provides an example of a small Gaeltacht region where the community use of Irish is under great pressure from growing English language dominance. Its western townlands around Cúil Aodha and north of Beál Átha an Ghaorthaidh were unquestionably in the Gaeltacht according to the early 1956 government report, while the rest were originally in the “potential inclusion” category, and some eastern townlands were simply added on the publication of the Gaeltacht Areas Order. The area was expanded in 1982 to include remaining parts of a parish on its eastern border. Múscraí is a landlocked mountainous area on the Cork side of the boundary between Counties Cork and Kerry. The area had a population of 3,401 according to the 2002 Census of Ireland (CSO 2004). Some 2,707 or 79.6 percent of the total population claimed to be able to speak Irish on census day, but only 1,207 (35.5 percent) said they did so on a daily basis (table 8.1). The area can be divided into four linguistic zones consistent with the percentage of daily users of Irish according to the census, and these areas correspond closely to local perceptions of language vitality in the area.

Fieldwork for this study was conducted over three and half years. The first thirty months, from the summer of 2000 to the spring of 2003, were spent gathering data by a quantitative questionnaire, which was followed by qualitative interviews with selected informants from the quantitative study. The project investigated the language abilities, practices, and ideologies of fluent Irish speakers in the region, not those of the population as a whole. It is thus not methodologically wholly comparable to the work of Ó Riagáin (1992), conducted in the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht region in Kerry, further to the west, in the 1980s, which was based on a sample of the whole population, including Irish speakers and non-Irish speakers and concentrated on the dynamics of language transmission from parents and the broader community. The
quantitative questionnaire did, however, take many elements of Ó Riagáin’s as its core subject matter.

The initial aim was to interview one-third of all the daily Irish speakers in the area over fifteen years old, in proportion to their distribution by age group and gender. Broadly speaking, this was achieved (table 8.2), although it was difficult to locate enough fluent Irish speakers to complete the quota in the eastern area where the language was least used, and some oversampling occurred in circumstances where the number of very fluent speakers was shown to be much higher than the number

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8.1</th>
<th>Population Claiming Ability to Speak Irish in Múscraí (percent)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15–19 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cúil Aodha</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh</td>
<td>98.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(65.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baile Mhic Íre</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(59.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cill na Martra</td>
<td>81.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(42.4)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

_Source_: Special Calculation by Central Statistics Office from Census 2002.  
_Note_: The percentage who say they use the language daily is given in parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8.2</th>
<th>Daily Speakers of Irish in Each Area within the Múscraí Gaeltacht (Census of Population 2002) and the Numbers in the Valid Survey</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15–19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cúil Aodha</td>
<td>Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Survey: 56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh</td>
<td>Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Survey: 89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baile Mhic Íre</td>
<td>Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Survey: 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cill na Martra</td>
<td>Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Survey: 19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Source_: Census Statistics from Special Tabulation by the Central Statistics Office.
who claimed to use the language daily in the census. A total of 239 valid questionnaires were completed. They were conducted face-to-face by the author and local fieldwork assistants in interviews in Irish that lasted between twenty minutes and several hours. The sample was built using the snowballing, or friend-of-a-friend, technique, whereby local knowledge enabled us to make initial contact in each age cohort in each subarea, and then informants suggested the names of others, who were interviewed until the quota was reached. This is a very effective way to engage with a very small population, and nobody who was approached to complete the quantitative questionnaire refused to cooperate. The resultant data reflect the attitudes and practices of a significant proportion of the most fluent regular speakers of Irish in this Gaeltacht area.

Irish Speakers in Múscraí

According to these findings, the strongest Irish-speaking areas within Múscraí are the communities to the northwest (Cúil Aodha) and southwest (Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh) of the region. The Cúil Aodha area has a population of 438 and is the strongest Irish-speaking community, with some 83.3 percent who claim to speak Irish, 246 or 56.2 percent of whom say they do so on a daily basis. Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh is a village and surrounding mountainous countryside with a population of 863, where some 40.6 percent claim to use Irish on a daily basis. The practice of intergenerational transmission is under great pressure in Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh, all informants in the present study placing great importance on schooling and social clubs in maintaining Irish as a community language among the young. The school-going populations of these two areas, although physically in proximity, rarely meet as they attend their local primary schools and then postprimary schools in Baile Bhúirne and Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh, respectively. As a result, the small group of thirty-nine Irish speakers in the fifteen- to nineteen-year-old cohort from Cúil Aodha and the seventy-two in Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh (table 8.1) remain linguistically isolated. To the east of these two core areas lies Baile Bhúirne/Baile Mhic Íre, an urbanized area on the main Cork to Killarney road, with a population of 1,297 and some 34.4 percent daily Irish speakers. Further east and to the south lies a fourth area in the electoral divisions of Cill na Martra, Doire Finín, and Ceann Droma, where only 25.7 percent of the 820 people claim to use Irish daily, a percentage that drops in some parts among certain age groups.

The Múscraí region is clearly a bilingual community where Irish is under great pressure as a community language, but it is also one that played an important role in the revival movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many revivalists attended summer colleges in the area. Father Peadar Ua Laoghaire, born locally, was one of many writers from the area and one of the leaders of the caint na ndaoine (speech of the people) movement that established the basis of the Irish language and literature revival on the contemporary language of the native speakers rather than on the earlier literary variety. The Irish Folklore Commission, founded in 1935, also collected a large amount of material from storytellers and tradition bearers in all parts of Múscraí, proving the vigor and scope of the Irish language oral tradition in this area in comparatively recent times. The regional variety of Irish is, however, perceived
locally as significantly distant from the standard language, particularly with regard to verbal forms, vocabulary, and syntax.

**Irish as a Home Language**

Unlike some other recent studies (Ó Giollagáin 2002, 2005), this research did not seek to categorize Gaeltacht Irish speakers as native or neonative speakers along anthropological grounds according to the language of their parents or the length of time that their families had been in the area. Instead, the aim was to collect data on the practices of fluent speakers in this Gaeltacht region, and informants were included based on residency in the area and their competence to use Irish fluently and well enough to discuss some quite sophisticated sociolinguistic issues. The questionnaire and interview thus performed a gate function in selecting highly competent language users. Only a handful of informants were not originally from the area, and all had ties to the region through family or marriage. Informants were asked to say which language or combination of languages they learnt first at home. There was a marked difference between those in the fifteen- to nineteen-year-old category and those over twenty years old. Only 28 percent of the younger informants, most of whom were in their final year at school or had left school the previous year, thought that they had learnt Irish first, while 52 percent thought that English was the first language or dominant language in their youth. Although still a significant proportion, only 26 percent of those over twenty years old thought that English was their only or dominant first language, 37 percent saying that Irish was their first language, and a further 37 percent saying that they spoke both at home. Only a few individuals in the sixty plus age group of Irish speakers claimed to have spoken English or a mixture of the two languages as their first language.

It is not appropriate to describe the younger speakers as semispeakers. In her studies of Scottish Gaelic communities in northeastern Scotland, Nancy Dorian (1981, 107) describes semispeakers as not being fully proficient in Gaelic, their speech being marked by what the fully fluent speakers described as “mistakes.” While one could argue that the younger speakers in this study were semispeakers of Múscraí dialect Irish, they were for the most part very articulate in Irish, and while their speech style might not be as rich in idiom as that of the older speakers, it is nevertheless functional and expressive. If a comparison can be made to Dorian’s models of speaker types, they most closely resemble the “young fluent speakers” of the Embo area (Dorian 1981, 116), their linguistic “faults” passing unremarked in everyday conversation with older speakers until a question of authenticity or idiom might actually be discussed. One older informant suggested that theirs was a form of youth speak, common in local English too. An analysis of younger Gaeltacht speakers, especially in the more strongly Irish-speaking areas, would be a fruitful area for further research.

**Children’s Language Competence**

Parents of pupils of school age during the survey believed that their children had a reasonably good command of both Irish and English, although more felt that their English was “very good” compared with their Irish (table 8.3, cf. Ó Curnáin 2007).
The qualitative interviews showed that participants’ criteria for describing a child as competent in the two languages, Irish and English, were different. Irish ability in the younger children in particular tended to be assessed by parents according to the child’s ability to conduct everyday conversations in the language, whereas skills in English were often connected to more formal reading and writing. English ability was also often expressed in comparative terms, a child’s progress being compared to that of the peer group and relations living elsewhere in Ireland or abroad. This is natural in that English-speaking society is much broader but also displays a more targeted approach to English acquisition, with greater value being placed on English literacy and education for wider communication.

**Irish Literacy**

Actual ability in reading and writing Irish is a good indicator not just of a person’s literacy skills but also of their experience with the standard language, as this is the variety that they are most likely to encounter in written form.

Table 8.4 reveals some stark facts. Only just over half of the fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds claim to have no problems in reading Irish, despite the fact that the survey sample is of fluent Irish speakers who live in an environment where Irish is spoken as a community language and who have done all their schooling through the medium of Irish. Those who are least confident about their reading skills are actually those who have the most contact with the written word—the school-age category (fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds) and that of the majority of the parents of younger

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Assessment of Reading Ability in Irish (percent)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15–19 Years (n = 46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can only read it when it is a local variety of Irish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can read Irish well, but sometimes have problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have no problems in reading Irish</td>
</tr>
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children in the survey (thirty- to forty-four-year-olds). It is in these two groups that there is also a small peak in the percentage claiming that they can only read a local variety of Irish. The peak in the sixty plus group can be attributed to the most elderly in this open-ended group, some of whom did not attend school in their youth or for whom their only reading materials in Irish are collections of local history and folktales published in the dialect. Difficulty in reading Irish is not just associated with the problems of the standard but also is associated with aliteracy in Irish, literacy in Irish being tied to schoolwork and to only very limited usage beyond. Indeed, those who claim to have no difficulty in reading Irish may not actually read very much in the language in their everyday lives. Nevertheless, the official standard is the only written form of the language experienced by the vast majority of informants. The qualitative data clearly show that there is alienation with the written word because it is in what is perceived to be an inauthentic variety. Exclusive use of the official standard in schooling since the 1950s is clearly an element in the complex matrix of language endangerment, particularly for the younger age groups and their parents who are most in contact with it.

Language Standardization and Irish Dialects

It is not unusual for a recently coined standard variety to create ambiguity about authenticity in communities undergoing language loss and revitalization. Fañch Broduic (1995a) observes that revived standardized Breton, which accounts for most of what is written and published in the language, is not accepted as authentic by the majority of native speakers but that with few exceptions these speakers have not transmitted any variety of their language to their children (Broduic 1995b). In Ecuador, field research (King 2001, 93–99) has shown that the main point of contention between older native Quichua speakers and their younger relatives who have learnt the Unified variety is perceived authenticity, notably in respect of neologisms and pronunciation. The Irish of the Munster Gaeltacht regions, including Múscraí, differs in this dynamic from other minorized languages in that there was a relatively strong written tradition in the dialect that is perceived to have been replaced by the official standard while the continuing processes of language shift have taken place. The official standard is not deemed to be dialect neutral; one informant from Cúil Aodha explains his reasons for speaking (local) Irish only to his children thus: “Déinim é chun an teanga a choimeád beo agus gan an droch-Ghaoluinn chaighdeánach nó Chonamarach a bheith i Múscraí” [I do it to keep the language alive and to avoid bad Standard or Conamara type Irish coming into Múscraí].

Language revitalization is the overt aim of the state and is widely supported in national surveys (Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin 1994). While there is no evidence that the vast majority of Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht are not in favor of the preservation and development of Irish, there is strong evidence that the speech community and the national collective diverge significantly on the role and form of the target variety to be revitalized. Whereas the language policy of the state is explicit in this respect, the standard language being the only variety used in administrative publications and the school curricula, the unwritten but nevertheless forceful language policy of the community does not totally accept the dominance of the standard. There is also an
important mismatch between the community’s own ideology and practice: the continuing decline in the vitality of localized Gaeltacht varieties of Irish is evidence of the language community’s estrangement from the home variety in favor of English. This drift away from robust dialectal use is reinforced by schooling, where only the standard language is used in reading and writing. The authority of the standard language is, however, ambiguous. It requires practitioners to accept it as a subtle, dialect-neutral, and effective tool for national communication, yet this goal is quite abstract as, even among highly competent Gaeltacht Irish speakers, productive reading and writing in Irish is linked to schooling and not widely practiced by the majority after school years (Ni Mhianáin 2003; Ó hIfearnáin 2005). It requires effort to acquire a command of the standard, a variety that is seen as somewhat synthetic and of limited practical use in their daily lives. Estranged from their home variety through the dynamics of language shift and because it is not reinforced at school, the standard is equally rejected by some as a legitimate and useful target variety because of its distance from local authentic speech, adding to the spiral of linguistic marginalization.

The Authorship and Authority of Official Standard Irish

The development of an Caighdeán Oifigiúil, Official Standard Irish, was driven by the needs of statehood and the role ascribed to Irish as the national and first official language by the constitution. Its development conforms closely to the stages of language planning in Haugen’s model (1959), based on Norwegian, with which it was contemporary. The modern standard’s origins are in the cultural nationalist movement of the nineteenth century, and it represents a fundamental paradox. The revival movement was built on an ideological commitment to the revitalization and development of caint na ndaoine (the speech of the people), a dialectally diverse language with an impoverished spread of domains of usage, as a unified national language. The full version of the standard was first published in 1958 (Rannóg an Aistriúcháin 1958). It has been reprinted many times and is still the authoritative handbook, although there are frequent debates about its reform (e.g., Ó Ruairc 1999; Ó Baoill 2000; Williams 2006). The 1958 volume covers mainly grammar and orthography, complementing a document published some eleven years earlier that dealt only with spelling reform (Rialtas na hÉireann 1947). By the 1970s the standard spelling and grammar were firmly established as the only authoritative variety in the state administration and education, the key domains of Irish language policy.

The authorship of standard Irish is officially anonymous. It is the work of Rannóg an Aistriúcháin (the “Translation Section”), which is a service of the Houses of the Oireachtas, being the Dáil (National Representative Assembly), Seanad (Senate), and Oifig an Uachtaráin (the President’s Office). The handbook’s origins, and so those of the standard itself, are thus in Rannóg an Aistriúcháin’s desire for internal consistency in the provision of Irish versions of government and legislative documentation. The first version of the full standard was published in 1953 with the more tentative title of Gramadach na Gaeilge—Caighdeán Rannóg an Aistriúcháin [Irish Grammar—The Translation Section’s Standard]. This was seen by Rannóg an Aistriúcháin as the first step in a national consultation about the standard. They write (Rannóg an Aistriúcháin 1958, viii) that the opinions and suggestions they received as a result of
that publication formed the basis for the next draft, which was itself then given to unnamed people who they knew to be interested in grammar and who had expertise in the field. The major work in establishing the standard then took place in 1957 as all the previous work and input were reassessed. They declare further that “helpful advice was given by native speakers from all the Gaeltacht areas, from teachers, and from other people who had particular knowledge of the language, and it was agreed with the Department of Education that this booklet should be published as a standard for official usage and as a guide for teachers and the general public” (translation from Rannóg an Aistriúcháin 1958, viii). The standard was thus developed by a small group of language professionals who sought advice from unnamed experts and acquaintances for the specific purposes of government administration. Having developed this useful tool for internal use, it was crucially then adopted by the Department of Education, and so guaranteed its central position through schooling.

The standard is constructed on four basic principles, translated here from Rannóg an Aistriúcháin (1958, viii):

1. As far as possible not to accept any form that does not have good authority in the living language of the Gaeltacht;
2. Choose the forms which are most widely used in the Gaeltacht;
3. Give appropriate importance to the history and literature of the Irish language;
4. Seek regularity and simplicity.

Although these guidelines show that Gaeltacht Irish varieties played a key role in the founding ideology of the standard, and the authors themselves do say that all its forms and rules comply with the usage of good Irish speakers in “some part” of the Gaeltacht, each of the decisions on the standard form can be contested. For example, no definitions are given of “good authority” as opposed to any other kind of authority. Although using the most widely used form of a word or grammatical structure may seem democratic, it is not stated whether this means that which is understood most widely throughout the country or that which is used by the largest number of Gaeltacht Irish speakers. The latter might leave the authority consistently with the dialect(s) of Conamara, which although only one part of the Gaeltacht contains about half of all of the Gaeltacht’s Irish speakers.

While setting out its preferred forms, the standard professes not to impose itself as the only acceptable form of the language: “Tugann an caighdeán seo aitheantas ar leith d’fhoirmeacha agus do rialacha áirithe ach ní chuireann sé ceartfhoirmeacha eile ó bhail ná teir ná toirmeach ar a n-úsáíd” (Rannóg an Aistriúcháin 1958, viii). [This standard gives recognition to particular forms and rules but it does not remove the validity of other correct forms, nor does it forbid their usage.]

However much the authors may have wished to reconcile the existence of the standard with the continued vitality of the regional dialects, the two have not existed in total harmony. The dialects, being the native forms of Irish, have continued to lose their vitality as part of a well-documented language shift that continues in the Gaeltacht while they benefit from negligible recognition from the education system and state agencies. The decline of the dialects is not simply a coincidence, but in part
a consequence of the promotion of the standard as a prestige form. It has its roots in
the national language ideology.

Niall Ó Dónaill, a native of the Donegal Gaeltacht in the northwest of the prov-
ince of Ulster, was an intellectual and creative writer but also a state-employed trans-
lator and lexicographer. He was the chief editor of the Irish-English Dictionary
Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla, which was first published in 1977 and is still the standard
reference. He was an active member of the milieu that was working to produce the
standard in the 1950s and was one of its champions. In his provocative and highly in-
fluential essay on the development of Irish, Forbairt na Gaeilge (Ó Dónaill 1951), he
clearly articulates his belief that although those who are developing the Irish lan-
guage must be careful to cultivate its native roots, they should cut and prune it to
make it develop in more useful ways: “Is cosúil teanga le habhaill. Is é an bás di
scaradh lena fréamhacha, ach is troimide a toradh na géaga a bhearradh aici” (Ó
Dónaill 1951, 12). [A language is like an apple tree. Break its roots and it dies, but its
fruits are heavier for cutting its branches.]

Ó Dónaill makes the point forcefully in this work that the future of Irish is in the
cities and on the national stage and that the promotion of the dialects through an
overindulgence of caint na ndaoine is a danger to its progress: “Is é bun agus barr mo
scéil go gcaithfear foréigean a dhéanamh ar chanúnachas leis an teanga Ghaeilge a
shlánú” (Ó Dónaill 1951, 56). [The basis of my message is that we must assault dia-
lectal traits/fondness for dialects if the Irish language is to be saved.]

Nevertheless, Ó Dónaill observed the power that the standard quickly acquired
some thirty years later when he was editing a modern edition of a book by an author
from his own area that was written in the early twentieth century. Writing in the liter-
ary and current affairs magazine Comhar, he commented on some local dialect forms
that clearly were correct and held authority locally, but which were now frowned upon
by editors as being illegitimate or displaced by the standard: “Ní ‘ceartfhoirmeacha
eile’ a bhí iontu, ag cuid mhaith de lucht eagair na Gaeilge, ach foirmeacha réamh-
chaighdeánacha ar fáisceadh an muinéal go reachtúil acu sna caogaidi i d’Teach
Laighean” (Ó Dónaill 1981, 21–22). [Many Irish language editors decided they were
not “other correct forms,” but prestandard forms whose necks had been legislatively
wrung in the 1950s in Leinster House (i.e., seat of the Dáil and Seanad).]

It is clear that although the authors of the standard explicitly stated that they did
not intend to undermine any dialectal form that had a historical basis and was part of
the living language of the Gaeltacht, after having been adopted by the education sys-
tem and by all the state agencies, the standard took on its own dynamic to become the
only acceptable form in most domains of written Irish usage. The fact that the stan-
dard is primarily a written variety has also led to a diglossic situation for the varieties
of Irish in the Gaeltacht, where spoken Irish takes as its basis the regional dialect,
while all forms of written language tend toward the standard, as this is what is to be
found in textbooks and in most published material. Although the standard is flexible
to the extent that local dialect words and idiom can be used in a standardized text,
there is an observable dualism is its application, the point that Ó Dónaill (1981) high-
lights. Although many forms are “acceptable,” clearly standard usage has deter-
mined the “preferred” forms for schools and official documentation. The association
of the standard with written Irish and the popular perception of its prescriptive nature are especially cause for concern in populations where the local variety has been weakened through language shift and dialect attrition. As the standard variety of Irish has not developed as a spoken variety outside school-learner circles, it challenges regional dialects but does not offer a complete alternative model—in effect imposing a form of silence on native dialect speakers.

The perception that the local variety is distant from the new prestige forms of the standard may also actually contribute to decline in the vitality of the spoken language. Nancy Dorian (1987, 59) has observed that teaching a grammatically standardized prestige version of a language to a community who speak a tangibly different variety only emphasizes the marginal nature of their own dialect in their eyes and further undermines their belief in the language’s role and legitimacy. This is certainly a factor that can be observed in the Múscraí study but not one that applies to the whole of the Irish-speaking population. In broad terms, it seems that those whose language skills are strongest, typically the older generations, have little difficulty in understanding the standard language or indeed other regional varieties of Irish. In the course of fieldwork it became increasingly apparent that the older speakers had a much deeper well of passive knowledge of the language, based on oral tradition, the heavy literature content of Irish schooling before the 1960s, and exposure in their youth to relatives and neighbors who had little command of English. The dynamics of language marginalization and the strengthening of the role of English in this bilingual society, coupled with widespread aliteracy in Irish (i.e., most speakers have the ability to read and write Irish but few develop the habit of using these skills), mean that the opportunity to exercise these language skills is limited. While few outside the language-centered professions are productive users of the standard in their everyday lives, the elders tend to see it as a form they can understand that is a useful unifying tool for the national language. In contrast, many younger speakers fall between two camps.

With some rare exceptions, younger Irish speakers do not have such a deep knowledge of their regional variety because the bilingual society in which they live is now dominated by English and the opportunities to obtain the profound passive knowledge that older members of the community had are no longer available due to social changes such as the fragmentation of extended families, the concentration of shops and social venues outside the local communities, and the diversification of professions from farming and trades that kept people close to their homes. The older speakers are mostly confident enough in their own variety, have enough residual linguistic resources to understand interlocutors who speak other varieties, and have less of a problem reading written Irish in the standard, a situation that is akin to what Haugen (1966), when discussing semicommunication between speakers of related language varieties, described as the trickle of sufficient messages through a rather high level of code noise. The difference between these older speakers and the younger speakers is that the latter have to make a conscious effort to acquire either the local variety or the standard, or both, and are thus limited in the important passive ability to accommodate other language varieties, whether written or spoken. In the formulation of language management policies, the target variety for revitalization is thus ambiguous.
Conclusion
Grenoble and Whaley (2006, 154–56) have argued that although standardization has undeniable benefits for minorized languages, the very process can facilitate continued language loss for a wide variety of reasons. Written standards in particular unavoidably reduce variation and create new hierarchies of linguistic prestige. The standard is an essential tool for the continued development of Irish as a national language. It has served the national language community well, and modern Irish is now a highly developed and subtle medium that can and is regularly employed to discuss all contemporary issues from politics and intellectual and academic questions, through legislature and governance, to all facets of daily life. However, in those regions where Irish is endangered as a community language, the power of the standard as a prestige written variety does itself contribute to the multifaceted process of linguistic endangerment because of the ambiguity of a target language for Gaeltacht speakers faced with a shift or revitalization scenario. Language management has been shown to consist of sustaining or changing language practices and ideologies of the speaker community to achieve certain linguistic goals (Spolsky 2004). In the case of Irish, the evidence would suggest that creators of a national language policy should seek a compromise that would reinforce intergenerational transmission of the local variety through schooling so as to avoid conflict in the target variety and to encourage community language development. This would, however, require a change in the driving language ideology of the national collective to accommodate the uncodified, yet deeply rooted language ideology of the Gaeltacht in a productive way that would not undermine the national development of Irish that the national standard has manifestly facilitated.

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