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Stereotypes and linguistic prejudices in Ireland

Abstract (English)

What sort of images does the word Ireland conjure up for you? A land of saints and scholars, or a mystical land of leprechauns and fairies? A recent Google search on 'Irish Culture' conjured up some 137 million results containing everything from potatoes, pints of Guinness, rural cottages, Irish dancers, musicians and of course our beloved Saint Patrick. Just some of the stereotypes perceived by the world, or at least by Google, of what being Irish entails. But what of we, the Irish ourselves? And what of our views on our own native language? Do these stereotypes merely exist in the minds of those living outside of the Emerald Isle, or are they present in the minds of the Irish themselves?

Abstract (Gaelic)

Cén cineál íomhánna a thugann an focal Éire chun cuimhne duitse? Tír na naomh agus na n-ollamh, nó tír thaibhseach na leipreachán agus na síog? Bhí de thoradh ar chuardach Google ar 'Irish Culture' le deireanas 137 milliún toradh ina raibh, idir eile, prátaí, piontaí Guinness, títhe beaga faoin tuath, damhsóirí Gaelacha, ceoltóirí agus, ar ndóigh, Naomh Pádraig ionúin is ansa linn.

Níl ansin ach cuid de na steiréitíopaí is dóigh leis an tsaol mhór, nó le Google ar a laghad, maidir lena bhfuil i gceist más Éireannach thú. Ach cad é fúinne, na Gaeil féin? Agus cad é faoinár dtuairimí i leith ár dteanga dhúchais féin? An bhfuil na steiréitíopaí seo in intinn na ndaoine a chónaíonn lasmuigh den oileáinín ghlas, nó an bhfuil siad in intinn na nGael féin?

Just some of the stereotypes perceived by the world, or at least by Google, of what being Irish entails. But what of we, the Irish ourselves? And what of our views on our own native language? Do these stereotypes merely exist in the minds of those living outside of the Emerald Isle, or are they present in the minds of the Irish themselves?

When we speak about stereotypes in Ireland it is important to look at the historical context and how that has evolved over time, before and after the political divide of Ireland into North and South in 1921. Partition, or Irish independence – and it is referred to as both, depending on where you live and your outlook – came about as a group of Irish Nationalist Republicans fought to free Ireland from British Rule, which led to the unsuccessful militant attempt in 1916 known as The Easter Rising. Although this particular attempt was unsuccessful it led to The War of Independence which was fought in the years after The Easter Rising,

and resulted in Ireland being divided into two jurisdictions. It was agreed that the six predominantly unionist counties in the North of Ireland would remain under British Rule and that the remaining twenty-six counties would form an independent state known as the Irish Free State (and after the constitution of 1937 as the Republic of Ireland).

The stereotypes of a particular group – such as Irish speakers – have an impact on how all members of that group are viewed and treated by society, and on their status in that society. Yet in a divided society such as Ireland, both North and South, this is a particularly interesting and complex issue due to the linguistic journey of both jurisdictions and the social and political standing of the Irish language in both jurisdictions.

Written stereotypes of the Irish people can be found as far back as the 12th century when Gerald of Wales compiled his *Topography of Ireland*, an account of the landscape and people of Ireland written around 1188, soon after the Norman invasion. The text is reputed to have played a central role in shaping English colonial attitudes towards the Irish people, with images of the Irish such as this:

The Irish are a rude people, subsisting on the produce of their cattle only, and living themselves like beasts – a people that has not yet departed from the primitive habits of pastoral life. (Cambrensis, 70)

Although there is little or no reference in the above-mentioned text to the language of the people, the Irish language remained the majority tongue as late as 1800 despite various attempts to ban it (such as the Statutes of Kilkenny in 1366), but it became a minority language during the 19th century.¹ A combination of political factors together with the Great Irish Potato Famine and the emigration that occurred in subsequent years contributed to this.

Due to the introduction of the National Schools system in 1831, the Irish language was banned from school premises by order of the British Government; in fact children who spoke their native tongue were routinely punished and made to wear a “tally stick” around their neck which counted the number of times they had accidentally reverted to their mother tongue. This led to the stereotyping of the Irish language as backwards and associated with the lower classes. In fact, one of Ireland’s most prominent politicians at the time, Daniel O’Connell, although a native Irish speaker himself, encouraged the Irish to learn English to better themselves (Boylan 1998, 306).

More than half a century would pass before the Irish language experienced a revival led by Irish language activists and scholars, which saw the foundation of The Gaelic League in 1893 – whose main objective was to encourage the use of

¹ According to the 1841 census Ireland had 8,175,124 inhabitants. In 1841 4 million people in Ireland spoke Gaelic. (O’Beirne Ranelagh 1994, 118).

the Irish language in everyday life – and a revival of Irish culture and music. These activists founded a weekly Irish language newspaper in which poetry, song, and short stories were published in the Irish language, something which was at odds with the cultural norm at the time. Authors such as Pádraig Pearse and Pádraig Ó Conaire were given a platform to share their works in a style akin to European Romantic literature, written in their native tongue.

In this literature, a view emerges of the Irish language as something natural, elemental and expressive in its purity. After partition in 1921 a refined version of this romanticised stereotype begins to be recorded, in literature at least – one that links the Irish language to an idyllic setting in rural Ireland with a noble peasant class struggling against the elements to eke out a living. This stereotype is to be found extensively in the autobiographical literature from the Gaeltacht (Irish speaking) areas from the first half of the 20th century, in which the people are portrayed as impoverished, hard done-by peasants with nothing to offer the world but the richness of their tongue. This viewpoint was challenged and satirised in Flann O'Brien's novel *An Béal Bocht*, published in 1941, which was a parody of these autobiographies, playing on the comedic effect of the peasants' tales of misfortune.

In the Irish language, to put on the *Béal Bocht* (the “poor mouth”) is to exaggerate the unfortunate situation you have found yourself in in order to gain sympathy and perhaps charity. The book is set in the stereotypical surroundings of rural Ireland where it never stops raining, and everyone is destined to be poor as long as they continue to speak “the smooth Gaelic” and live off the state grants provided for Irish speakers. In fact, the only time life is injected into this quiet, rural community is when hordes of another type of stereotype, the wealthy Dublin Gaeilgeoirí, who are learning Irish mainly from books, descend upon the area to experience an authentic “Irish native existence”.

These stereotypical Gaeilgeoirí are still perceived to exist in Dublin to this day, to be found with a notebook in the pocket of their tweed jackets with pens poised at the ready to record the phrases and idioms of native Irish speakers and seen as a learned, middle-upper class whose children attend Irish-medium schools as a sign of their status in society.

In the 21st century in the Republic of Ireland, the Irish language is officially the first language of the state, with protection offered under both the Constitution and The Official Languages Act 2003; and to the English-speaking majority, this leads to the stereotype of Irish speakers as privileged individuals who benefit from an excessive advantage over their English-speaking peers with regards to state funding and services. Indeed some non-Irish speakers see Irish speakers as cranks who are always complaining, and are often heard saying “Sure they all speak English, why do they need services in Irish?” The reality unfortunately is very different, as the previous Irish Language Commissioner, Seán Ó Cuirreáin, stated in his annual report in 2013:

In too many instances the provision of services through Irish is conditional on “available resources”, which suggests that such services may be perceived as optional extras rather than fundamental rights. In one such scheme, commitment to the provision of services through Irish, detailed over 3 pages, has the condition “subject to available resources” listed 11 times.

The Language Commissioner resigned from his post not long after this report, citing disillusionment with the lack of adequate resources being provided for Irish speakers.

The teaching of the Irish language is compulsory in all schools in the Republic of Ireland, and the 2011 census reported an increase in the percentage of Irish speakers of 7% since 2006. There has also been significant growth in the number of Irish-medium schools within the Republic of Ireland, with 332 recognised primary and post-primary schools operating solely or mainly through the Irish language, both in Irish-speaking areas and in non Irish-speaking areas. These facts and figures challenge the perception and stereotype of Irish being a dead language.

The aforementioned Gaelic League, founded in 1893 and charged with preserving the Irish language, was founded by a Protestant, Douglas Hyde, the son of a Church of Ireland minister. Hyde is quoted as saying, “The Irish language, thank God, is neither Protestant nor Catholic, Unionist nor Separatist”. When the Belfast branch of The Gaelic League was set up in 1895 it was founded in a predominantly Unionist area on the Beersbridge Road in Belfast. However, due to the impact of partition in Ireland, both political and socio-economic factors meant that after 1921 the Irish language took a very different path in Northern Ireland to that in the Republic of Ireland.

Some members of The Easter Rising in 1916 were also Irish language activists who believed that the revolution was not just political, but that all symbols of Britishness should be rejected, including the use of the English language. Northern Ireland, a unionist majority wishing to remain part of the United Kingdom in 1921, became a volatile environment for Irish language speakers, as this was increasingly seen as a symbol of Irish republicanism.

This stereotype led to nationalists in the North of Ireland clinging on to their Irish identity and learning Irish as a means to express their cultural identity, along with things such as playing traditional Irish music and the native sports of hurling, handball and Gaelic football. Although not exclusive to nationalists, these were all methods used to rebel against British rule. Many Catholic schools taught the Irish language, whereas Protestant schools tended to shy away from it. This only furthered the cultural stereotype of the Irish language belonging to nationalists only. As stated in the research commissioned by Foras na Gaeilge in 2016 and completed by The Economic and Social Research Institute of Ireland entitled *Attitudes of the non-Catholic population in Northern Ireland towards the Irish Language in Ireland*:

Attitudes towards the Irish language in Northern Ireland have traditionally reflected the political differences between its two divided communities, with non-Catholics having more negative attitudes towards the language. Recent figures by DCALNI (2014) reveal that a higher proportion of Catholics (30%) have knowledge of Irish than both those with other or no religion (12%) and Protestants (3%) which is not surprising, given that it is mostly the Catholic schools that offer Irish alongside other modern languages. (Darmody 2016)

It was not in the formal education system alone that the Irish language was being taught, however; classes for adults ran several nights a week in the Ardscoil in Divis Street in Belfast, and in 1936 Cumann Chluain Árd in Belfast was founded. Cumann Chluain Árd is an Irish language club which not only teaches language classes in the direct method, but holds many social events for Irish language speakers and learners alike. From this, a new breed of Irish language activists was born who enforced an Irish-only rule in the building and who held on to the vision of an Irish-speaking Ireland. Although idealistic, in reality many of them married other Irish speakers they had met in the Cumann Chluain Árd and they decided to extend the language outside of the club building and founded an Irish-speaking community where the houses, which they built themselves, contained only Irish speakers. Raising their families to speak Irish in urban Belfast in the 1960s was not standard practice, and led to the stereotyping of these families as eccentric extremists whose motto was “Ná habair é, déan é”, “Don’t say it, do it”.

Belfast in the 1960s and 1970s was a place of huge social unrest. The Civil Rights movement was in full swing, petitioning for equality for Catholics in terms of employment, social housing and the perceived discrimination against them in comparison to their Protestant counterparts. The burning of Bombay Street in 1969 by a sectarian mob, where Catholic houses were burnt to the ground with residents left homeless, provided an opportunity for these Irish-speaking eccentrics to put their motto into action. They proceeded to rebuild the houses in Bombay Street themselves, which helped soften their image as Irish-speaking elitist extremists and showed them in a new light as community activists.

As their children approached school age, these community activists decided that their children should have the right to Irish-medium education and in 1971 they built and opened Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, the first Irish-medium primary school in the North, with just 9 children. Ignoring threats of illegality and imprisonment from the state, the parents kept the school afloat for 13 years with voluntary fundraising alone, creating their own resources and school books. In 1984 the state recognised and funded the school, and it became the first recognised Irish-medium school in the North.

Irish-medium education has not been without its own stereotypes, however, as more pre-schools and subsequently primary schools were founded in Republican areas due to popular demand. When the first Irish-medium secondary school was founded in Belfast in 1991, it was increasingly difficult to find qualified teachers

who had fluent Irish in the North of Ireland. Many of the teaching staff were volunteers who were former Republican prisoners, some of whom had learnt the language while in prison and who had read extensively on Irish history, inspired by the vision of Pádraig Pearse and his contemporaries to build an Irish-medium education system where children would excel academically with a social conscience.

The learning of Irish during internment or imprisonment was not a new phenomenon; during the Irish language revival of the late 19th century; many prisoners taught and learned the Irish language while imprisoned. In the 20th century in Crumlin Road Gaol in Belfast, in Armagh Jail and in Long Kesh in County Antrim, prisoners were learning to read, write and speak Irish and learning about Irish history and culture. During the 1980s, several Irish language enthusiasts, including hunger-striker Bobby Sands, came together to form an Irish-speaking wing of Long Kesh in which Irish was the predominant spoken language. Bobby Sands wrote many of his poems and diary entries in Irish and openly promoted and encouraged parents to send their children to Irish-medium education. His contemporaries were among the volunteers who taught within Meánscoil Feirste, the first Irish-medium secondary school in Northern Ireland, and in the years following his death in 1981 due to hunger strike, the numbers of children attending Bunscoil Phobail Feirste and other Irish-medium schools increased dramatically.

Irish-medium education today is a growing sector in both the North and South of Ireland. In the North alone, there are 45 pre-schools, 36 primary schools, and 5 post-primary schools providing Irish-medium education to over 5,000 children. Despite many of these schools being located in what are traditionally nationalist areas, most schools identify themselves as being either non-denominational or inter-denominational schools. The children who attend and attended Irish-medium schools still struggle to shake off religious and social prejudices about their religious backgrounds, and often find themselves labelled as Republicans and Catholics, which is often not the case. This new generation of Irish language speakers are largely secular, confident and outspoken on human rights and language issues. Many have gone on to work as young professionals, community activists, youth workers, politicians and workers in both the public and private sectors.

The modern day Irish speaker in Northern Ireland uses a wide variety of services through the Irish language despite there being no formal legislation from the state. The Irish language is recognised as a minority language in the European charter, but not as an official language in the North of Ireland. The people themselves have built a community-orientated Irish language infrastructure which avails itself of limited funding and voluntary contributions and is driven by and led by the community themselves.

Following the success of Irish-medium education, a vibrant youth work sector has emerged to support the growing numbers of young Irish-speakers who enjoy a packed calendar of social and sporting events throughout the year. Among the 13 Irish Language cultural centres in the North, five are located in Belfast alone. These centres provide Irish language classes along with a variety of cultural events.

Returning to the roots of the foundation of the Gaelic League in East Belfast in 1895, one Protestant woman was inspired to set up one of these Irish language centres – Turas, meaning journey – in November 2011 on the loyalist Newtownards road. The wife of the former Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) leader Brian Ervine, and the sister-in-law of David Ervine, also a former leader of the PUP and a member of the Ulster Volunteer Force (a loyalist paramilitary group), Linda Ervine was an unlikely candidate to become a promoter of the Irish language, but her research into the 1911 census in Ireland revealed that her ancestors, despite being Protestant, were fluent Irish speakers.

Liberated from her own cultural stereotypes, she began learning Irish in the longest established cultural centre in Belfast, the aforementioned Cumann Chluain Árd. Beginning with just one class a week, she quickly progressed to attending several nights, then intensive courses, then immersion courses in the Gaeltacht, and finally is now completing her Diploma in Irish with a view to obtaining a degree. Her determination has seen Turas flourish with more than 10 classes a week in the heartland of loyalism; Turas has more than 120 members, including ex-loyalist paramilitaries and British army officers, and indeed members of the security forces, including the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

This is at odds with the notion of the Irish language being (as Democratic Unionist politician Sammy Wilson dismissed it), a “Leprechaun language”. Linda Ervine herself has strongly criticised her own community’s stereotypes and prejudices towards the Irish language, saying:

I didn’t find a lot of politics in the Irish-language community; it’s such a diverse community. Of course different languages become politicised. People want to use language as a badge [...]. But for me the language itself is the innocent in all that.

There have been several occasions where Unionist politicians have mocked the Irish language. In 2014, another DUP politician, Gregory Campbell, imitating the Irish language phrase which is often used by nationalist assembly members in Stormont “Go raibh maith agat a Cheann Comhairle” (meaning “Thank you, Chairperson”) said “Curry my yoghurt, can coca coayler”. Upon being challenged about his comments and asked what he thought about a proposed Irish Language Act, he went on to say he would treat it as “no more than toilet paper.”²

² <http://www.thejournal.ie/gregory-campbell-curry-my-yoghurt-1803414-Nov2014/>.

Aside from these few individuals, attitudes have changed with regards to the Irish language, North and South. In the most recent survey conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute on behalf of Foras na Gaeilge in 2013, it was shown that support for the Irish language has increased by 18% in the Republic of Ireland and 16% in the North of Ireland and opposition to the Irish language has decreased by 9% in both jurisdictions.

With regards to the Irish language being taught in the school system as a compulsory subject, there was a notable increase of 26% in the number of people in agreement in the North of Ireland and an increase of 7% in the Republic of Ireland since 2001. This statistic alone shows that while Irish remains a minority language, support for it as an important aspect of Irish cultural heritage in both North and South has increased.

Thankfully, while some of the old stereotypes regarding Irish speakers and the Irish language remain, the outlook is much more positive than in previous years. The negative stereotypes and prejudices held by some in the North are dissipating as people learn that the language is just that, a language – a means of communication which is fundamentally linked to our cultural heritage. In the South there remains a view held by a minority that those speaking the language and asking that the state provide services in the language are linguistic cranks – it is interesting to note however that many of this minority also feel that the state should provide services for the new generation of Irish speakers and provide extra resources to help them.

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Bibliographical information

This text was first published in the book:

Anna Dąbrowska/Walery Pisarek/Gerhard Stickel (eds.) (2017): Stereotypes and linguistic prejudices in Europe. Contributions to the EFNIL Conference 2016 in Warsaw. Budapest: Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. [ISBN 978-963-9074-68-2. 280 pages.]

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