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Language, politics and identity in Ireland: a historical overview.

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1. Introduction.

The Belfast Agreement (1998) brought about new constitutional arrangements between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, and a new structure of governance within Northern Ireland. Designed, amongst other aims, to end the war in Northern Ireland that had lasted almost thirty years, the agreement was arguably the most important political development within Ireland since the declaration of the Irish Republic in 1948. It is revealing therefore, that the text of the concord included the following general declaration:

> All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance
> in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish
> language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic minorities, all of
> which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland (Belfast Agreement
> 1998: 19).

In the context of a document that outlined the contours of a major historical settlement, this is a striking statement about the significance of language(s) in Ireland which indicates the continuing social and political status of 'the language question(s)' in Irish history. It will be the purpose of this chapter therefore, to present a short account of how and why language came to gain such importance in Ireland. Central topics in the analysis will be the role played by language in the imposition of colonial rule; in the incorporation of Ireland within the United Kingdom; in the movement to gain autonomy from British rule; and in the shaping of identity in both independent Ireland and Northern Ireland.

2. Language and colonial rule.

In 1366, some two centuries after the Anglo-Norman invasion, the first legislative act of linguistic colonialism was passed by an Irish Parliament. *The Statutes of Kilkenny* were premised on a historical contrast:

> whereas at the conquest of the land of Ireland, and for a long time after, the
> English of the said land used the English language, mode of riding and apparel,
> and were governed and ruled, both they and their subjects called Betaghes,
> according to the English law... now many of the said land, forsaking the English

language, manners, mode of riding, laws and usages, live and govern themselves according to the manners, fashion, and language of the Irish enemies (Irish Archaeological Society 1843: 3,5).

As a result of this cultural decline 'the said land, and the liege people thereof, the English language, the allegiance due our lord the king, and the English laws there, are put in subjection and decayed, and the Irish enemies exalted and raised up, contrary to reason'. To address the issue, the *Statutes* stipulated a series of measures, including one that,

> ordained and established, that every Englishman do use the English language, and be named by an English name, leaving off entirely the manner of naming used by the Irish; and that every Englishman use the English custom, fashion, mode of riding and apparel, according to his estate; and if any English, or Irish living amongst the English, use the Irish language amongst themselves, contrary to this ordinance, and thereof be attainted, his lands and tenements, if he have any, shall be seized into the hands of his immediate lord (Irish Archaeological Society 1843: 11, 13).

On one reading the *Statutes* might be taken as evidence of a confident colonial state imposing its language and culture on the colonised. In fact, however, the edict implicitly reveals the complexity of the linguistic order in the medieval period since rather than trying to control the Irish-speaking native population, the *Statutes* were directed at the colonisers in order to prevent the process of Gaelicisation. The focus was on the behaviour of those who lived in The Pale, the relatively narrow area of English rule: the 'English, or Irish living among the English'. In other words, the real problem for the colonial State in this period was not the fact that the vast majority of the subject people spoke Irish, it was that many of the colonialists were assimilating to the native culture.

The language struggle in medieval Ireland was not restricted to English and Irish, since the colonisers brought not only their own Norman language, they also imported the diverse languages of their soldiery (including Flemish, Welsh and Anglo-Norman). But as the contest of languages progressed, the significant relations developed between Irish, Latin, French and English. But while French and Latin served as the languages of bureaucracy and administration, neither was used widely as a vernacular tongue and, over a significant period, French was gradually displaced by English as the main rival to Irish in Ireland. The spread of English was, however, a very limited process and one which depended on the uneven

consolidation of colonial rule beyond the towns. The difficulty the colonisers encountered in this regard is revealed in various legislative acts. In 1465, for example, the Irish Parliament passed 'An act that the Irishmen dwelling in the counties of Dublin, Myeth, Vriel, and Kildare, shall go apparelled like Englishmen, and wear their Beards after the English Maner, swear Allegiance, and take English surname'. The aim of forcing the Irish living under English rule to conform to English culture included the crucial issue of naming and the heads of families were ordered to adopt 'an English surname of one town, as Sutton, Chester, Trim, Skryne, Cork, Kinsale: or colour, as white blacke, browne: or arte or science, as smith or carpenter: or office, as cooke, butler' on pain of 'forfeyting of his good yearely' (Stat. Ire. 1786: 5 E 4. c. 3). But the most notable feature of these efforts to prescribe linguistic change is their failure, as exemplified by the exemptions that so often accompanied the apparently rigorous strictures. Thus the municipal archives of Waterford in 1492-3 recorded an order that no one 'shall plead or defend in the Irish tongue' in local courts, and that if necessary an English speaker had to be employed for the purpose. Importantly, however, an exception was made 'if one party be of the country' (which probably means outside the city), 'and then all such shall be at liberty to speak Irish' (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1885: 323). A more striking sign of the weakness of early colonial language policy is the fact that when one of Poyning's Laws in 1495 re-affirmed the Statutes of Kilkenny, it made an exception of 'those that speaketh of the Irish language' (Stat. Ire. 1786: 10 H7. c. 8).

The turning point came as part of a larger process of centralisation and consolidation undertaken by the later Tudors. The key text was Henry the Eighth's 'Act for English Order, Habit and Language' (1537) which elaborated on a point noted in the *Statues of Kilkenny* almost two centuries earlier:

> there is again nothing which doth more contain and keep many of [the King's] subjects of this his said land, in a certain savage and wild kind and manner of living, than the diversity that is betwixt them in tongue, language, order and habit, which by the eye deceiveth the multitude, and persuadeth unto them, that they should be as it were of sundry sorts, or rather of sundry countries, where indeed they be wholly together one body, whereof his highness is the only head under God (Stat. Ire. 1786: 28 H 8. c.xv.).

Given the importance of this insight, the act contained a warning:

> whosoever shall, for any respect, at any time, decline from the order and purpose
> of this law, touching the increase of the English tongue, habit, and order, or shall
> suffer any within his family or rule, to use the Irish habit, or not to use
> themselves to the English tongue, his Majesty will repute them in his noble
> heart... whatsoever they shall at other times pretend in words and countenance,
> to be persons of another sort and inclination than becometh the true and faithful
> subjects (Stat. Ire. 1786: 28 H 8. c.xv.)

In other words, whatever the Irish Lords in particular said about their political allegiance to the crown, adherence to the English language was to be considered a touchstone. Failure to use English was to be taken as a sign of political dissent.

With the extension of English power in Ireland, the ever-increasing bureaucratic and administrative demands of the colonial state necessitated the use of English, at least in those areas where Crown rule was consolidated. And yet despite this development, the fact is that the imposition of English was a remarkably slow process that took place over centuries and remained patchy, at least until the end of the eighteenth century. That does not mean, however, that the 'Act for English Order, Habit and Language' was simply another failed legislative effort. Notwithstanding the ineffectiveness of Henry's edict as an instrument of rapid linguistic change, its significance lies precisely in its articulation of the link between cultural identity (the 'manner of living' that involves 'tongue, language, order and habit') and political allegiance. This ideological tenet became central to colonial language policy and was summarised in Edmund Spenser's dictum that 'the speach being Irish, the heart must needes bee Irish' (which led Spenser to believe that state policy should follow previous practice since 'it hath ever beene the use of the Conquerour, to despise the language of the conquered, and to force him by all meanes to learne his') (Spenser [1596] 1633: 48, 47). More importantly perhaps, the putative connection between linguistic identity and political allegiance was one that came to haunt colonialism; it became the basis of Irish cultural nationalism's entire political project.

3. After the Union: an English-speaking Ireland.

There were a number of legal attempts that sought, directly or indirectly, to impose English in Ireland, yet it is clear that the impact of legislation on spoken Irish was very limited.[1] For example, the antiquarian, John Windele, estimated that in the early eighteenth century, two thirds of the Irish population used Gaelic as their everyday language (1,340,000 from a total

of just over two million) (Windele 1857: 243). And it was claimed that by the end of the century, more than half the population were, perforce or by choice, Irish speakers: 'at least eight hundred thousand of our countrymen speak Irish only, and there are at least twice as many more who speak it in preference' (Stokes 1799: 45). Thus though the pace of Anglicisation may have been slow, such surveys indicate that significant linguistic change was underway in the eighteenth century. If these figures are correct (and they are the best available), there was a clear acceleration of a process that developed even more quickly in the following century. For the 1851 census reported that less than a quarter of the population spoke Irish, of whom fewer than five per cent were monoglot, while the 1911 census recorded slightly more than thirteen per cent as Irish speakers, with fewer than three per cent monoglot (Crowley 2005: 158). The shift is startling: from around sixty-six percent to fifteen percent in less than two hundred years. But given that the use of law as the instrument of linguistic change was relatively ineffective, how was this situation brought about? There are two principal factors: economics and cultural hegemony, both of which played important roles in the incorporation of Ireland within the United Kingdom after the Act of Union (1800).

Given the nature of colonialism, economic imperatives were bound to influence the use of language and there is evidence of an early understanding of this point. In the early eighteenth century, for example, Edward Nicolson argued that English was already the medium of economic exchange for the young: 'there is hardly a boy of 16 years old in Ireland but can understand and speak English. Their parents encourage them to it for their own trading and dealing with their English landlords' (Nicolson 1715: 27). Later, the material benefits associated with English were made clear in Arthur Young's *Tour in Ireland* (1780), in which he recorded that 'Lord Shannon's bounties to labourers amount to 50l a year. He gives it to them by way of encouragement; but only to such as can speak English, and do something more than fill a cart' (Young 1780: vol.2, 50). Such practices led to an ordering of English and Irish in terms of economics and affect. Anderson argued that for the native speaker, Irish was the 'language of social intercourse', whereas English was 'the language of barter, or worldly occupations; taken up solely at the market' (Anderson 1818: 54). Coneys put the point in starker terms: 'English is the language of his commerce — the Irish the language of his heart' (Coneys 1842: 73).

Despite the linguistic effects brought about by economic pressure, however, the co-option of Ireland into the United Kingdom following the Act of Union (1800) was made problematic

by the fact that significant (if decreasing) numbers of the Irish remained Irish-speaking. It followed therefore that the political project of union had to be matched by a cultural attempt to hasten Anglicisation. There were two main aspects to this process. First, as Joe Lee has noted, the expansion of the Anglophone state (including measures which were, ironically, intended to meet nationalist demands), meant that English became the medium for a wide variety of forms of work, social mobility, and preference (Lee 1989: 666). Second, the impact of the state's economic policies meant that English became a necessity for basic survival as the growth of the cities drew workers away from rural Ireland (where the majority of Irish speakers were born) to lives that were almost exclusively conducted in English. In addition, the devastating effects of the Famine and the state's response to it not only caused a further massive population shift away from the countryside, it also taught the rural poor an important lesson. As emigration became a way of life, Irish parents eagerly sent their children to the state-funded national schools which taught entirely in the language they needed in Britain and America. The clarity of the parents' motivation was noted by an education commissioner: 'it is natural to inquire how this strong passion for education could have possessed a people who are themselves utterly illiterate… Their passion may be traced to one predominant desire — the desire to speak English' (Keenan 1857–8: xx).

Yet though the role of economics as a driver of linguistic change was crucial, it does not quite explain the nature of the shift since as Lee has noted, the economic argument 'would explain the acquisition of English, but not the loss of Irish' (Lee 1989: 662). This is indeed a puzzling question: why did Irish people apparently make the judgment that English could only be learned if Irish were dropped? After all, bilingualism had formed part of the linguistic experience of Ireland for a considerable period of time. The answer lay in the cultural status which increasingly attached to the English language in the nineteenth century. For although English had been the dominant language of economic life for a considerable period, the incorporation of Ireland into the United Kingdom brought with it the construction of English as the culturally hegemonic language and Irish as the stigmatised and secondary form.

There is evidence that the cultural as well as practical elevation of English began in the early eighteenth century, as Aodh Buidhe Mac Cruitín, poet, linguist, and member of the bardic class, noted:

> Féach na flatha ba fairsing in Éirinn uair…
> ur éirigh Galla agus ceannaithe caola an chnuais

le tréimhse eatortha ag teagasc a mbéas don tsluagh;

do réir mar mheallaid a mbailte dob aolta snuadh

tá Béarla i bhfaisean go tairise is Gaeilge fuar.

(Consider the rulers who once were generous in Ireland... until foreigners and the cunning avaricious merchants came between them, teaching their own customs to the people; according as they seduce our fairest towns English becomes fashionable and Irish decays) (Ó Cuív 1986: 397).

Later in the eighteenth century the 'fashionability' of English amongst the Irish middle class in Ireland led to a remarkable confidence in their own form of the language. Nowhere was this more clearly articulated than in the Edgeworths' *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), in which they made the bold claim that 'the Irish, in general, speak better English than is commonly spoken by the natives of England':

> The English which [the Irish] speak is chiefly such as has been traditional in their families since the time of the early settlers in the island. During the reign of Elizabeth and the reign of Shakespeare, numbers of English migrated to Ireland; and whoever attends to the phraseology of the lower Irish, may, at this day, hear many of the phrases and expressions used by Shakespeare. Their vocabulary has been preserved in its near pristine purity since that time, because they have not had intercourse with those counties in England which have made for themselves a jargon unlike to any language under heaven (Edgeworth 1802: 199-200).

Evidently, at least amongst the urban middle class, the elevation of English as the prestige form was well under way by the end of the eighteenth century. In relation to the rural poor, however, the construction of English as the culturally hegemonic form took longer and was brought about by two modes of institutional practice whose influence was both paradoxical and particularly effective: the Catholic Church and political nationalism.

After the legalisation of the Catholic colleges in 1782, English was used as the language of Irish Catholic higher education and one practical effect of this policy was the lack of support for the teaching of literacy in Irish, as Conor McSweeny noted: 'An Irish prayer-book is a thing which the poor Irish peasant has never seen. Not only has he not been taught the language which he speaks, but his clergy have never encouraged, and have sometimes

forbidden him to learn it' (McSweeny 1843: vii, 55). The Church's decision that the future lay with English led to peculiar scenes:

> I have seen an Irish bishop, with mitre on head and crozier in hand, delivering an elaborate English discourse to an Irish congregation, while a priest stood in the pulpit interpreting it sentence by sentence. This prelate was the son of an Irish peasant, born and reared in one of the most Irish districts in Ireland. Many of his audience might have been, and probably were his playmates in childhood and boyhood, and must have heard him speak the language of his father and mother; but he had never learned it, and was now too distinguished a dignitary of the church, to remember anything of the language of the vulgar herd he had left below him (McSweeny 1843: vii, 55).

This practical elevation of English and derogation of Irish was denounced bitterly by a contributor to the revivalist journal *An Claidheamh Soluis* at the end of the century: 'the priests are more to blame for the decay of Irish than any other class of the population… The priests are to blame as a body for their attitudes towards English' (Ruadh 1899: 454).

The general message from the Catholic Church (though there were important dissenting figures), was reinforced by the other national influence on the cultural life of the majority of Irish speakers: the movement for political independence. From the revolutionary United Irishmen of 1798 to the Land Leaguers and the Irish Parliamentary Party of the late nineteenth century, purely political nationalism resolutely set its face against the use of the Irish language. From one perspective, this tactic made sense, since English was the language in which politics was conducted in the metropolitan centre, but at a deeper level, the use of English tied Ireland culturally ever more closely into the Union. Like Irish-speaking parents, Irish politicians appear to have thought that they had to drop Irish in order to use English. The enigma is particularly pointed in the case of Daniel O'Connell, in practical terms Irish political nationalism's most successful leader. A native Gaelic speaker, O'Connell admitted that 'the Irish language is connected with many recollections that twine around the hearts of Irishmen', but, he added, 'the superior utility of the English tongue, as the medium of modern communication, is so great, that I can witness without sigh the gradual disuse of the Irish' (Daunt 1848: 14-15). Following O'Connell's lead, in both the political and cultural spheres, Irish became the language of memory and affect while English was the language of utility and modernity. In practice, as a later commentator noted, 'the Irish-speaking Irishman' was given

'the choice of learning English, and using English, or of being shut out from every public function of life in his own country' (Ó hEigceartaigh 1918: 17).

After Union, a combination of forces, many of which had been emergent for a considerable period, created a new linguistic situation in which English became not only the dominant language of everyday life for the majority in Ireland – the medium of economics, education, family life, religion and even political aspiration – but also the culturally hegemonic language of prestige and status. As a corollary, Irish became an unmodern language of poverty and exclusion. Thomas Davis, the Young Irelander, noted that 'the middle classes [thought] it a sign of vulgarity to speak Irish' (Davis 1914 105). Perhaps more significantly, a later observed noted that the 'illiterate Irish-speaking peasant' appeared to regard Irish as 'the synonym of poverty and misery' and to consider that 'many of the evils from which they suffer are traceable to its continued use' (Flaherty 1884: 13-14). With the spread of such sentiments, the cultural project of sealing Ireland's place in an English-speaking United Kingdom seemed to have been achieved.

The Irish language and independence

In 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland', a speech given to the National Literary Society in Dublin in 1892 (in the run-up to the Second Home Rule Bill), Douglas Hyde noted an incongruity:

> What the battleaxe of the Dane, the sword of the Norman, the wile of the Saxon were unable to perform, we have accomplished ourselves. We have at last broken the continuity of Irish life, and just at the moment when the Celtic race is presumably about to largely recover possession of its own country, it finds itself stript of its Celtic characteristics… it has lost all that [it] had – language, traditions, music, genius, and ideas. Just when we should be starting to build up anew the Irish race and the Gaelic nation… we find ourselves despoiled of the bricks of Irish nationality (Hyde 1986: 157).

To remedy the problem, Hyde set out a cultural agenda at the heart of which was the Irish language:

> Every Irish-feeling Irishman, who hates the reproach of West-Britonism, should set himself to encourage the efforts which are being made to keep alive our once great national tongue. The losing of it is our greatest blow, and the sorest stroke

that the rapid de-Anglicisation of Ireland has inflicted upon us. In order to de-Anglicise ourselves we must at once arrest the decay of the language (Hyde 1986: 160).

Given the broad economic, political and cultural context set out in the previous section, the prospects for Hyde's project must have seemed slim, even though his talk was instrumental in the founding of Conradh na Gaeilge/The Gaelic League in 1893. And yet, twenty years later, on the eve of the events that marked the beginning of the end of British rule in Ireland, no less a figure than Padraig Pearse declared accurately that the 'coming revolution' would be brought about by 'the men and movements that have sprung from the Gaelic League' (Pearse 1952: 91).

The possibility of a gap between political autonomy and national independence was first fully articulated by Hyde (though it had been foreshadowed in the work of Davis and the Young Irelanders in the 1840s). Such sentiments were relatively common after the fall of Parnell, when, as W.B. Yeats noted, 'a disillusioned and embittered Ireland turned from parliamentary politics' (Yeats 1955: 559). In fact Yeats advocated just such a shift away from purely political nationalism 'to a partly intellectual and historical nationalism…with the language question as its lever' (Yeats 1975: 237). And the distinction was explored in the first pamphlet published by the Gaelic League, Fr.O'Hickey's *The True National Ideal*:

> [Nationality] is the outcome, the resultant, the culmination of many things, of which political autonomy is but one – very important doubtless, but by no means the only or even the chief, thing to be considered. You may have a nation without political autonomy – not, I admit, a nation in all its fullness and integrity; but I emphatically insist that autonomous institutions, failing all other elements and landmarks of nationality, do not constitute a nation in the true sense (O'Hickey 1900: 1-2).

Given the apparent disjuncture between the achievement of Home Rule and what Hyde called the rupturing of 'the continuity of Irish life', O'Hickey asked the crucial questions: 'what is a nation? Or, in other words, what is nationality?' Acknowledging features such as tradition, history, literature, and institutions, O'Hickey asserted that 'none is more fundamental, none more important, none strikes deeper roots, none is more far-reaching in its results than a national language. This truth the Dutch clearly grasped, and have enshrined in a proverb – "No language, no nation"' (O'Hickey 1900: 2). The principle was reflected in one of the

Gaelic League's mottos: 'Tír gan Teanga, Tír gan Anam' (A nation without a language is a nation without a soul) and it signalled a new primacy for culture. For underpinning the Gaelic League's campaign was the belief that only culture could prevent the promise of independence from becoming an empty gesture of political formalism. Specifically, only the revival of the Irish language could guarantee a nation worthy of the struggle to escape British rule.

At the end of the nineteenth century then the Irish language found a new role as the central factor in the constitution of the nation's cultural identity (there had been academic interest in Irish from the mid-eighteenth century, but its focus was antiquarian and did not include the contemporary spoken language). At times this culturalist tendency skirted the dangers of disregarding the need for political independence. D.P. Moran, for example, a key figure in the Irish-Ireland movement, claimed that when young Irish men and women could speak Irish as well as English, 'then there will be a genuine Irish nation – whoever may be making the laws – which economic tendencies, battering rams, or the Queen's soldiers will be powerless to kill' (Moran 1905: 27). For the most part, however, the Irish language was taken to be the repository of the nation's past and, therefore, for that very reason, its future:

> A people's language tells us what they were even better than their history. So
> true is this that even if the people had perished and their history had been lost,
> we might still learn from their language – and in language I include literature –
> to what intellectual stature they had attained, what was the extent and direction
> of their moral development, and what their general worthiness (Kavanagh 1902:
> 1).

This form of cultural nationalism produced a mode of identity politics in which the Irish language was used to pit Irishness against Englishness. In many cases this took the form of an insistence on the importance of defending the cultural distinctiveness of Irish (and indeed other endangered languages) against the predations of empire. Thus Dermot Chenevix Trench asserted pointedly that 'national language movements are not as a protest against the abolition of barriers of race in the interests of human solidarity, but against the forcible extermination of a racial genius through the pressure of political and economic circumstance' (Trench 1912: 29). All too often, however, the debate followed the pattern of differentiation, ordering and evaluation that is typical of identity politics. This produced a variety of rhetorical tropes, some of which belonged to the discourse of biological racism. Trench, for example, referred

to 'the Irish larynx' as 'the counterpart of Gaelic phonetics', and asked his reader if s/he wanted to live in 'an Ireland which reflects your racial type?' (Trench 1912: 27, 32), while in similar vein, O'Hickey warned of the dangers of Anglicisation:

> We may, to all intents and purposes, cease to be Gaels; we may, in a sense, become West Britons; further we cannot go – Saxons we cannot become. Should the worst befall, it were better, in my opinion, to be something that could be clearly defined and classed; for anything at all would seem preferable to a mongrel, colourless, nondescript racial monstrosity evolved somewhere in the bosom of the twentieth century (O'Hickey 1900: 4).

Indeed on occasion, cultural nationalists such as Moran were explicit about the benefits of racial discourse:

> Racial hatred is a bad passion at the best, and one which it appears to me, is absolutely unjustifiable on moral grounds, unless in so far as it is impersonal and complementary to a real desire to keep intact the distinctive character, traditions, and civilisation of one's own country (Moran 1905: 67).

Such thinking led to some absolutist conclusions. Kavanagh described the English as 'a people with whom [the Irish] have nothing in common but a common humanity' since 'nature itself has drawn a broad line of separation, I must say a triple line, geographical, moral and intellectual' (Kavanagh 1902: 10). While a leader in *An Claidheamh Soluis* in 1917 asserted simply that 'An Irishman, however bad, is better than an Englishman, however good' (O'Leary 1994: 211).

Though dominant, such sentiments were not unchallenged and from a socialist perspective Frederick Ryan argued that 'the mere desire to speak another language does not of necessity correlate at all with the active desire for political freedom… if the people are content to let the substance of their liberty go, for the gew-gaw of a new grammar, so much the better – for the reactionaries' (Ryan 1904: 217-8). And even within the Gaelic League there was an ongoing debate between 'nativist' and 'progressive' elements over tactics and strategy. In fact in many ways the League itself was the epitome of a modern mass movement whose focus on education depended on innovative methods which inspired cultural confidence in a country greatly in need of it. Yet despite such tendencies, by far the League's greatest achievement was the consolidation of cultural nationalism's fundamental principle as the cornerstone of the national independence movement. Indeed, although the League's goal of reviving the

language (or even halting its decline), was largely unattained by 1921, there can be no doubt that by that point, the idea behind the slogan 'gan teanga, gan tír' (no language, no nation) was firmly embedded in the national consciousness. In other words, over a remarkably short period of time, the cultural hegemony of the English language in Ireland had been challenged and, at least in principle if not in practice, weakened. As Michael Collins noted, the Irish language had played a central role in the struggle for independence and its place in the new Ireland seemed certain. The future was full of linguistic promise, even if it had yet to be realised:

> We only succeeded after we had begun to get back our Irish ways, after we had made a serious effort to speak our own language, after we had striven again to govern ourselves. How can we express our most subtle thoughts and finest feelings in a foreign tongue? Irish will scarcely be our language in this generation, nor even perhaps in the next. But until we have it again on our tongues and in our minds, we are not free (Collins 1922: 100).

Language, identity, politics

Yet if the association of language and identity was linguistic nationalism's most notable legacy, then its achievement was ambivalent. For as noted in section two above, the linking of language, national identity and political allegiance was not a new development in Ireland. In fact it was first produced by the colonists as part of their policy of linguistic colonialism; from *The Statutes of Kilkenny* (1366) to Henry the Eighth's 'Act for English Order, Habit and Language' (1537), language use was taken to signify identity in the most simple and crude way. As the colonial adventurer Fynes Moryson's put it somewhat disingenuously in his *Itinerary* (1617): 'communion or difference of language, hath alwayes been observed, a spetial motive to unite or allienate the myndes of all nations... And in generall all nations have thought nothing more powerfull to unite myndes then the Community of language (Moryson 1903: 213). Yet though this belief arose precisely from the political and cultural order imposed by colonialism, it was not theorised and popularised within Europe at least until the end of the eighteenth century. At that point, largely under the influence of the German Romantic and idealist traditions, questions of language, identity and politics again rose to the forefront of crucial debates.

It is important to put this work in context, since many of the key thinkers involved in theorising these issues were situated in locations which gave them a sharp understanding of

the politics of language. J.G. Herder, for example, one of the early and most significant thinkers in this line, worked in Riga, a city which belonged to the Russian Empire but in which German was the prestige language. Surveying this state of affairs, Herder commented:

> Has a people anything dearer than the speech of its fathers? In its speech resides its whole thought-domain, its tradition, history, religion, and basis of life, all its heart and soul. To deprive a people of its speech is to deprive it of its one eternal good.... The best culture of a people cannot be expressed through a foreign language; it thrives on the soil of a nation most beautifully, and, I may say, it thrives only by means of the nation's inherited and inheritable dialect. With language is created the heart of a people.

Herder's forging of an absolute bond between a people's entire way of life and its language was to be enormously influential. Translated into political terms, the linkage was incendiary, as illustrated by Fichte's observation in the *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808) that 'it is beyond doubt that, wherever a separate language is found, there a separate nation exists, which has the right to take charge of its independent affairs and to govern itself' (Fichte 1968: 49). Such sentiments swept across Europe and gave a cultural bent to nationalist movements seeking independence from occupying powers. In Ireland in the 1840s this included Thomas Davis and the Young Irelanders, and Davis articulated the point in terms that echo Herder:

> to impose another language on a people is to send their history adrift among the accidents of translation – 'tis to tear their identity from all places - 'tis to substitute arbitrary signs for picturesque and suggestive names – 'tis to cut off the entail of feelings and separate the people from their forefathers by a deep gulf (Davis 1914: 97-8).

The political conclusion was similar to that outlined by Fichte: 'a people without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard its language more than its territories - 'tis a surer barrier, and more important frontier, than fortress or river' (Davis 1914: 98).

It is important to historicise such claims in order to grasp their significance. In the context of anti-colonialism, the putative link between language and identity, specifically language and national identity, can be viewed as part of a progressive tendency designed to undermine the justification for colonial rule. In the quotes from Herder, Fichte and Davis given above, for example, this is precisely how the language and identity link operates: we have a language of our own, an identity of our own, therefore we should have autonomy. And there can be little

doubt that this principle, embedded within cultural nationalism, played an important role in re-shaping the political map in Europe and beyond from the late eighteenth century. Yet it needs to be remembered that the origin of this link lay with the colonial project itself and was part of the justification of linguistic colonialism: they have an alien language, an alien culture, therefore we need to impose our language and culture on them. In fact both linguistic and cultural colonialism and linguistic and cultural nationalism depended on an act of homogenisation that elided a wide variety of differences in order to produce abstract forms - 'language', 'culture', 'identity' - which were then deployed in very specific circumstances for particular political ends. In the context of colonialism, the goal was the imposition of a language as a way of cementing colonial order and rule. In anti-colonial struggles, the aim was to use the apparently unitary language in order to foster identity as a way of opposing colonial rule. But what happened once colonial rule had been overthrown? What were the effects of the 'language', 'culture', 'identity' link in Ireland and, just as importantly, Northern Ireland after independence?

In the Irish Free State, and later the Republic of Ireland, Irish was recognised as the national language and the first official language (English was the second). And from the very inception of the post-independence state, attempts were made to revive Irish as an everyday language of communication. 'Compulsory Irish' was introduced as a central component in education policy, support (albeit limited) was given to the Gaeltacht areas, the language was standardised, and Irish was made a requirement for public service posts. Whatever the intention, however, and notwithstanding the expenditure of considerable resources, the project failed (and was recognised to have failed by the 1960s) in terms of its practical goal. This led to a paradoxical situation, described in an influential report by the Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research:

> The average individual, for instance, in the national population feels rather strongly that the Irish language is necessary to our ethnic and cultural integrity, and supports the efforts to ensure the transmission of the language. At the same time, under present policies and progress, he is not really convinced that we can ensure its transmission. He has rather negative views about the way Irish has been taught in school and has a rather low or 'lukewarm' personal commitment to its use, although in this latter case, the average person has not sufficient ability in the language to converse freely in it. On the other hand, he strongly supports nearly all government efforts to help the Gaeltacht, but at the same time

feels that the language is not very suitable for modern life (Committee on Irish Language Attitudes 1975: 24).

The report indicated a general belief (supported by the facts), that the goal of making Irish a language of everyday life had not been realised, despite a certain type of good will towards the language on the basis of its role in 'ethnic and cultural integrity'. But at a more significant level, what the report showed was that in the context of the failure of the language revival project, all that remained was the idea of the language as a marker of identity. This was recognised in a later report, *The Irish Language in a Changing Society: Shaping the Future* (1988), which noted 'a widening gap between the symbolic significance attached to Irish as an official emblem of national identity, and its use as a richly expressive vernacular in everyday life' (Bord na Gaeilge 1988: xvi). Ironically, it may well be that it was precisely its role as cipher for identity that undermined the use of the language itself, precisely because the identity for which the language was supposed to stand was a conservative, outmoded form which did not reflect the realities of a changing Ireland. In any case, the fate of Irish has been clear for a long time: 'if it is to survive at all it will be as a second language rather than as the main language of society' (Ó Riagáin 1997: 173).

If Irish in Ireland became a marker of national identity rather than the language of national life, then what of was its role in Northern Ireland? The attitude of the Northern Irish state was dismissive from the start. Defending the abolition of state funding for Irish teaching in schools in 1933, for example, the Northern Irish Prime Minister commented: 'what use is it to us here in this progressive, busy part of the Empire to teach our children the Irish language? What use would it be to them?' (Maguire 1991: 11). This effectively summed up the antipathetic attitude of the state through to the 1990s. At that point, however, and building on promises made during the peace process, Irish language activists consolidated the real achievements made from the 1960s-on in the form of Irish-speaking communities that had been established across Northern Ireland (most notably in Belfast). This Northern Revival has produced a remarkable growth in the number of Irish speakers in Northern Ireland, a large number of Irish-medium schools, and the establishment of the Belfast Gaeltacht at the heart of the Falls Road (no small achievements given the situation only twenty odd years ago). In this situation, unlike that in the Republic, it is precisely the role of the language as a marker of identity that has allowed it to flourish. That said, however, in the context of a bitter conflict that lasted almost thirty years, and a society that remains divided on sectarian grounds, the use of Irish as a 'badge of identity' remains problematic. Even if they do not intend to do so, Irish-speakers

are perceived as making a statement about (non-British) identity every time they open their mouths, which means that the language continues to attract the attention of sectarians. This includes a prominent Loyalist member of the Stormont Assembly whose response to Sinn Féin members' use of Irish in parliamentary debates was to begin a speech with the words 'curry my yoghurt can coca coalyer' (a parody of 'go raibh maith agat, Ceann Comhairle').[2] All of which indicates how far the situation remains from the Belfast Agreement's recognition of 'the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity' in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to trace the bare outlines of the relations between language, politics and identity Ireland over a long historical period. Given the fact that Ireland was subject to colonialism, incorporation within the United Kingdom, and then partition (resulting in the creation of a sectarian state), it is little surprise that language has been embroiled in the complex social relations that have been played out on the island. Under the specific pressures of Irish history, language (in the form of Irish, English, Ulster Scots…), was reduced by various forces (some reactionary, some progressive) to little more than a marker of identity. Homogenised, made abstract, forced to fit prescriptive models of identity, the languages of Ireland have not been viewed historically as 'part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland', but as the means to foster division, to impose rule, and to create cultural and political hierarchy.

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[1] Legislation included: The Statutes of Kilkenny (1366); 'An Act that the Irishmen dwelling in the counties of Dublin, Myeth, Vriel, and Kildare, shall go apparelled like Englishmen, and wear their Beards after the English Maner, swear Allegiance, and take English surname' (1465); 'An Act for the English Order, Habit and Language' (1537); 'An Act for the Uniformity of Common Prayer and Service in the Church' (1560); 'An Act for the Erection of Free Schools (1570); 'An Act for the Explaining of some Doubts Arising upon an Act Entitled, An Act for the Better Execution of his Majesty's Gracious Settlements of his Majesty's Kingdom of Ireland' (1665); 'An Act to Restrain Foreign Education' (1695); 'His Majesty's Royal Charter for Erecting English Protestant Schools in the Kingdom of Ireland' (1733); and 'The Administration of Justice (Language) Act (Ireland) (1737).
[2] The insult led to the exclusion of Gregory Campbell, MLA, from Stormont for a day. http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/gregory-campbell-banned-in-absentia-over-curry-my-yoghurt-irish-language-stunt-30719543.html downloaded 14 November 2014.