Language Politics and Linguistic Justice

A RESPONSE TO 'POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN A (DIS)UNITED IRELAND' BY BRIAN Ó CONCHUBHAIR

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Justice, according to John Rawls, is 'the first virtue of social institutions' (1971, 3).[1] I hope that Brian Ó Conchubhair will forgive me if I take just one detail from a paper rich in details, namely his use of the term 'injustice', as a springboard for a few brief points on how the idea of linguistic justice may be said to pertain to the politics of language in Ireland.

That Ireland is the particular context here is significant. Linguistic justice, as with justice more generally, is context-specific: it takes on different meanings according to the particularities of the given real-world situation. What I have to say here is drawn from ongoing interdisciplinary work supported by a grant from the Irish government.[2] That work is as yet unpublished. Briefly, our analysis asked the following.

- What is the ideological orientation of the linguistic justice discourse as presented. by different social institutions in Northern Ireland and Ireland?
- How do the understandings of linguistic justice constructed by social institutions in Northern Ireland and Ireland compare?
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Our approach was to undertake a thematic content analysis of the public law and policy documents of a range of social institutions in both Northern Ireland and Ireland: an approach that is broadly similar to that of Dave Sayers in relation to the Welsh language.[3] We used the tripartite framework of Helder De Schutter for the characterisation of language ideology, as follows.

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[1] John Rawls, *A theory of justice* (Cambridge, MA, 1971).

[2] This grant provides funding for a research assistant on the project, a post taken up by Hannah Griffiths. Matteo Bonotti from Monash University is a significant collaborator on this work.

[3] Dave Sayers, 'Ideological directions in Welsh language policy: a content analysis', *SRA Cymru/WISERD thematic event: potential positives and negatives in the Welsh Government's drive for increased bilingualism*, 27 June 2014, Cardiff University; Dave Sayers, 'Exploring the enigma of Welsh language policy (or, how to pursue impact on a shoestring)', in Robert Lawson and Dave Sayers (eds), *Sociolinguistic research: application and*

1. Intrinsic—'languages are morally valuable in themselves, independently of the value their speakers attach to them. This intrinsic argument stands opposed to instrumental accounts, which consider only the individual to be the bearer of rights.'[4]
2. Constitutive—'The constitutive view says that language constitutes who I am, that my language and my identity are inextricably intertwined, that I cannot have concepts or views for which I do not have language, and that language allows me to express or articulate things that I could not have without having language.'[5]
3. Instrumental—'Instrumentalists … typically defend the idea that languages should be primarily seen as tools to perform nonlinguistically defined things [and] … that government interference in the domain of language is only legitimate in so far as it attempts to bring about these non-linguistic goals.'[5]

From our research we see that different versions of linguistic justice are at work (as well as fears of different types of injustice) in the various social institutions (including political parties). For example, we found that government policy in Northern Ireland is largely intrinsic while in Ireland it is largely instrumental. By way of further contrast, we found that discourse in relation to immigrant languages is largely constitutive.

As regards the political organisations in Northern Ireland, we found that the unionist position on linguistic justice holds to liberal neutrality, along with concern for the principles of equality and territoriality (i.e. that language rights and protections ought to be defined by territory and therefore restricted to certain geographical spaces). In contrast, the Irish republican and nationalist position is based on identity justifications. It is also concerned with equality but not with the principle of territoriality, but rather that of personality (i.e. that the rights and protections due to a given language ought to follow the individual speaker irrespective of where they find themselves in the given jurisdiction—Northern Ireland, in this case). The loyalist position appeals to identity justifications and is informed by capability deprivation (i.e. the hierarchy of socio-economic classes in Northern Ireland has had the effect of depriving loyalists of the opportunity to access certain aspects of their identity through different languages, namely Irish and Ulster Scots).

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impact (London, 2016), 195–214; Dave Sayers, 'Exploring the enigma of Welsh language policy … or, why content analysis matters!', RECLAS workshop, *Language on a pedestal*, 9 December 2019.

[4] Helder De Schutter, 'Language policy and political philosophy: on the emerging linguistic justice debate', *Language Problems and Language Planning* 31 (1) (2007), 1–23: 10 [5] De Schutter, 'Language policy and political philosophy', 8.

[5] De Schutter, 'Language policy and political philosophy', 9.

From this one may, perhaps, conclude that viewing the politics of language in Ireland through the lens of justice may offer an alternative perspective to the zero-sum position of the ethno-sectarian binary that is so characteristic of the linguistic culture war in Northern Ireland.