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# Irish Language and Public Broadcasting

Brian GAYNOR

**Abstract** : This paper examines the history of Irish language broadcasting since the foundation of the Irish state in 1922. It outlines how the role of Irish in the broadcast media has always been determined by the wider social and political landscape, and the changing conceptions of what constitutes Irish national identity. The initial aim of complete language revitalization gradually gave way to a policy of marginalization. It was only relatively recently that Irish has been officially recognized as a minority language, and this in turn has enabled the language and its users to reconsider themselves in a more political light. This is especially noteworthy in the field of broadcasting where a number of initiatives have instilled a sense of democratic participation amongst Irish-speakers in a public sphere hitherto dominated by English.

## 1. Introduction

According to the statistical trend of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in which the proportion of Irish speakers in the Irish population as a whole declined from 23.3% in 1851 to 13.3% in 1901 (MacGiolla Christ 2005:111), the Irish language would cease to exist as a spoken language by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That this has not happened is a testament to the efforts of both its users and the Irish state in ensuring that it did not follow in the footsteps of Latin and countless other deceased languages.

According to the latest available census figures (2006), the Irish language is spoken on a daily basis by some 85,070 people, a mere 7.1% of the total population. Another 8.1% claim to speak the language on a weekly basis, while separately some 29.7% define themselves as ‘competent Irish speakers’. (It should be noted in passing that these oft quoted results are the subject of some controversy. No clear, objective criteria were included in the census questionnaire to measure this competency which led Carnie (2006:6) to conclude that “these percentages...are probably grossly inflated”). Nevertheless it is still clear that Irish is a minority language within the Republic of Ireland. In fact, it has had this status ever since the country gained independence from Britain in 1922. Yet, until comparatively recently, the Irish state has denied the language any form of minority status, instead obstinately defining it as the “real native language of all citizens” (O’hIfearnain 2000:95). Such an unreconstructed political definition has in turn shaped the policies enacted by the state towards Irish. Initially emphasis, effort, and no small amount of expenditure were spent on trying to revitalize the language to become the first language of the nation, a status it hadn’t enjoyed in more than three centuries. When this failed to occur, as it was bound to, a more realistic shift in government policy

occurred to one of language maintenance.

## 2. Historical Background

Although some 400 years ago very few people in Ireland could speak English (Foster 1990:287), the start of the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the resultant changes in demography and social structure marked the beginning of the end for the primacy of the Irish language (Carnie 2006:3). There was a continuous migration of rural dwellers to the rapidly expanding urban areas of the country where the daily language, both by decree and commercial custom, was English. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Irish language was in rapid decline, with the Great Famine of 1845-49 in particular administering a severe blow. Fatalities in this period and the subsequent mass emigration that ensued - (according to O'Grada (1995:3), over one million people died as a direct result of the repeated failures of the potato crop and by 1870 a further two million had left the country) – were particularly acute in rural Ireland, hitherto home to the majority of Irish speakers. Emigration was primarily to English-speaking countries like the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, with the result that a whole of generation of Irish speakers was lost. Thus, by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, only some 18% of the population claimed to be native speakers of Irish (O'hIfearnain 2000:95).

Given that the most recent census results (if taken at face value) put the number of active Irish speakers at 7.1%, then this means that “Irish language policy is and has always effectively been determined by, or at least with the acquiescence of, those who do not actively speak it” (O'hIfearnain 2000:95). It is this benignly supportive attitude of the majority who are not Irish speakers themselves that slowed if not entirely stopped the decline in the language, and whose passive acquiescence makes it acceptable for the state to spend large sums of money on a language “which is habitually spoken by about 150,000 people” (MacGiolla Christ 2005:194).

The reasons for the support of this ‘silent majority’ are, according to Flynn (1993:77) twofold: first, the Irish language was and is used to foster group cohesion. The establishment of the nation-state required cohesion among the Irish population. Secondly, the language served as a marker of group differentiation from its former British ruler. “The Irish language was part of the founding state’s construct of a discourse on Irishness, a means of emphasizing the distinction between the Irish and the English” (Watson 2002:74). The founders of the state were intent on establishing a distinct Irish national identity opposed to that of their former colonial ruler, premised on speaking a different language (Irish), having different religious beliefs and practices (Roman Catholicism), playing different sports (Hurling and Gaelic Football), and having a different socio-economic structure built around a rural agricultural society. For the first government in 1922, these were the key pillars on which the national identity of the newly founded state was to be built.

It was, however, a profoundly static identity that did not or would not allow for change. As history has repeatedly shown, nations and how they imagine themselves are not fixed constructs, but malleable, subject to the ebb and flow of both national and international developments (Anderson 2006). This can be clearly seen in the changes that have occurred with regard to official state policy towards the Irish language. Initially the state took a proactive part in revitalizing the language, making it the only medium of instruction in compulsory education, and making it a mandatory requirement for employment in the public service. By the 1960's though, national identity had shifted from being a primarily cultural/linguistic based construct to a more broad based socio-economic ideal whose primary lingua franca was English. As Baker notes that "the economic determinism of Ireland from the 1960's onward in which social and economic advancement became associated with English speaking businesses also contributed to the decline in demand [for Irish]" (1997:83). A combination of the apparent failure of the earlier revitalization policy and the economic necessity of English led the state to reconsider its role and subsequently embark on a gradual withdrawal from its hitherto proactive role in language revival (MacGiolla Christ 2005:174). Further evidence of this shift came with the establishment in the 1970's of various semi-state bodies outside of government to deal with language policy, a move O'hIfearnain characterized as being "in agreement with a general European trend away from compulsion in language policies to one loosely based on reaction to the perceived needs of a minority" (2000:96). By the start of the new millennium this shift in the status of Irish from the officially perceived national language to a declining minority language was mirrored in the reactive stance taken by the state. It was no longer central to the discourse on national identity, but rather Irish found itself marginalized politically, culturally and geographically. The state did not totally absolve itself from language policy, but it increasingly reacted to grassroots' initiatives in education and the media rather than instigating such moves itself, "favoring its promotion but [clearly] compartmentalized as a minority issue" (O'hIfearnain 2000:97).

### **3.Public Broadcasting and the Irish Language**

As we have seen official language policy has neither always been explicit nor developed in isolation from other policies. The role of Irish in public broadcasting should equally be seen as part of, as opposed to distinct from, the general ethos and thrust of these policies. I use the term 'public broadcasting' purposefully for it has been primarily through the state broadcaster Radio Teilifis Eireann (RTE) that the Irish language has entered the media. Private broadcasting in Ireland is just over two decades old and its contribution to the Irish language could be at best characterized as 'minimal', at worst as 'desultory'.

In the formative years of the Irish state broadcasting was seen as an essential element in both language revival and the creation of a distinct national identity. This evidenced by the fact that the first White Paper on Broadcasting was published at the end of 1923, a mere year

after the establishment of the state and some two years before the setting up of the inaugural government commission into the Irish language, Coimisiun na Gaeltachta (Gaeltacht Commission) in 1925.

As Gorham (1967) has shown, broadcasting in the period prior to the Second World War, very much reflected the nationalistic intention to emerge from under the shadow of Britain. “Ethnic distinctiveness was broadcast in a diet of Irish music and songs, Catholic religious broadcasting, Gaelic Athletic Association matches, Irish politics, Irish language programmes and programmes for Irish learners” (1967:101).

The postwar period through to the beginning of the 1970’s saw a wavering in the state’s commitment to language revival. Rather than pursuing a policy of total language revival, it now favored an “English plus Irish approach, though far short of functional bilingualism” (O’hIfearnain 2000:103). In the sphere of broadcasting this was clearly evidenced in the Government Act legislating for the establishment of RTE, which explicitly prevented the state from interfering with regard to Irish language programming or in any other broadcasting area (RTE 2007). “The Act itself simply says that Irish should be used but without any defining parameters with regard to programming” (O’hIfearnain 2000:104).

In addition, RTE was established on a semi-commercial basis meaning that its revenue sources were funded by a combination of license fee revenue and advertising. Given that the majority of its audience was (and continues to be) English speakers, it was difficult for the station to justify devoting major resources to Irish and broadcasting such programmes at peak viewing times. Inevitably this led to a marginalization of Irish language programming with those few programmes broadcast been under resourced and often poorly made, further reducing their potential audience. This slow, enervating spiral would probably have continued if it had not been for the initiative taken by a small grassroots campaign. In 1969 a number of native Irish speakers formed Gluaiseacht Chearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta (The Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement), demanding the creation in the Gaeltacht<sup>1</sup> of a radio station for Irish speakers. “These activists had recognized Irish speakers as a minority and the Irish language as a minority issue. As citizens of the state they also believed that proper media presence was their right. This was indeed a radical departure for the time, and substantially different from the traditional state discourse on the nature of Irish speakers in society” (O’hIfearnain 2000:107). In response to this initiative RTE established Radio na Gaeltachta (RnaG) in 1971. The station quickly developed a loyal audience throughout the Gaeltacht with surveys (RnaG 1999, 2001) revealing that about 85% of all Irish-speaking adults listen to the station regularly.

More than just establishing an Irish language radio station, Gluaiseacht Chearta

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Gaeltacht’ is the Irish word for an Irish-speaking region. For official state purposes these are areas where the government recognizes that Irish is the predominant daily language.

Sibhialta na Gaeltachta predicated an important shift in how the language was politically construed. It was no longer a heritage marker, historically defined in cultural/ethnic terms, but rather assumed a politically vibrant status as the language of a linguistic minority, and all the rights and obligations that this entailed. Adding further momentum to this development was Ireland's ascension into the then European Economic Community in 1973. One of the effects of this was that the Irish state's hitherto marginalization of the Irish language meant that it increasingly came under the political and legal remit of the EEC's various directives and policies on minority languages within member states. Comparisons could now be drawn with the political, cultural, economic and media 'rights' granted to such minority languages as Breton (France), Basque and Catalan (Spain), Scottish Gaelic (Scotland) and Welsh (Wales).

The culmination of this process of defining Irish as a minority issue came with the establishment of a separate television channel for the language, Teilifis na Gaeilge (or TG4 as it is now known) in 1996. The new station also reflected and built upon developments in minority language media taking place on the wider European stage. Wales had already set up S4C, Scottish Gaelic had a television commissioning service, and minority broadcasts existed for both the Catalan and Basque minorities in Spain (MacGiolla Christ 2005).

TG4 has now been on the air for over a decade and has been gradually building its market share in a very competitive environment, registering 2.2% of total viewers during peak time (TG4 2007). However, it is necessary to draw a distinction between the market penetration of TG4 as a broadcaster and the success of its Irish language programmes. The station finds itself having to strike a precarious balance between content and its intended audience(s). Potential viewers span a continuum from fluent speakers of Irish to monolingual English speakers and meeting their diverse linguistic needs is a constant challenge. The station's prerecorded Irish language programmes are generally subtitled in English which has proved controversial among viewers (Irish Times 1996). Whereas the station believes that this policy may attract viewers, subtitles are a distraction for those who understand the content without them.

There is also the perception of TG4 catering for the Gaeltacht area rather than the nation as a whole (MacGhiolla Christ 2005). Viewing figures for Irish language programming on the two established national channels broadcast by RTE are consistently higher than for programmes of similar quality and subject matter aired on TG4. "When a topical current affairs programme is on a RTE channel its audience can be as much as ten times that of the same programme shown on TG4. Programmes on RTE benefit from 'piggy-backing', particularly during peak time viewing" (O'hIfearnain 2000: 112).

It should be noted too that at the time of TG4's establishment, the then government Minister with responsibility for broadcasting Michael D. Higgins stated that "I was always taking a decision from the principle of broadcasting diversity and citizenship rights rather than...[an Irish language] revivalist strategy" (Watson 2002:750). Taken in this light TG4 can be

seen as a means of giving a minority community a collective voice in Irish in a national public sphere dominated by the English language. Indeed one could argue that there is no distinct Irish-speaking community as such, just Irish-speaking individuals isolated in an English speaking society. Following from Heller *et al's* (1994) arguments, a media constructed public space is necessary to allow these Irish-speaking individuals to unify and develop a collective identity and sense of communal self.

...identities are not supplied by immediate experience or feelings, and the themes are not present in the experience and memories of the participants as an immediate reflection of events and encounters. They need to be elaborated, transformed and legitimized through public communication, taking into account existing themes and identities and working upon them with resources available to the participants. More importantly, all this must happen publicly, the 'grammar' of public communication having characteristics significantly different from those of private communication." (Heller *et al.* 1994:169-70).

Hence perhaps the greatest public service provided by both TG4 and RnaG is not language revival but rather the provision of a public identity to a minority, which in turn creates a sense of democratic inclusion rather than isolated marginalization.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As I have shown the position of Irish in the broadcasting media throughout the history of the state has been inexorably tied to the strength of the language in society, its position in national language policy and the initiatives and activities of the state broadcaster RTE. Since the foundation of the state, a continuing majority of the public has supported measures to maintain the Irish language though leaving the enacting of such measures to the state. In the pre-war decades successive governments pursued a revitalization policy as part of their efforts in creating a distinct Irish national identity. In the post-war period a shift occurred in how the state conceived of this identity, moving away from a concept determined by cultural tenets to a more socio-economic model. This in turn had repercussions for language policy. Increasingly, Irish found itself marginalized as the hitherto policy of active revitalization gave way to one of reactive marginalization. However, the late 1960's saw 'marginalization' become 'minority' as Irish was politically reconfigured as a minority language with attending rights and responsibilities. This was particularly evident in the field of broadcasting which saw the establishment of Radio na Gaeltachta. Adding impetus to these developments was Ireland's increasing and ongoing involvement in what is now known as the European Union and the rights and responsibilities this membership places on minority language maintenance. The successful launch of the country's first Irish language television station, TG4, was further evidence of the recognition and importance attached to maintaining the language. In addition, these developments in the sphere of broadcasting have provided Irish speakers with a sense of



democratic inclusion, allowing them to give a public, Irish voice to their opinions, criticisms, demands and views on Irish society, and their place within it. For O'hIfearnain these developments are grounds for optimism, that at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century "the increasing openness of Irish society within the European and international contexts had led to definitions of 'Irishness'...being more prominent in the public mind, highlighting questions of language maintenance and revival, in turn leading to a higher profile for Irish than at any time since the early 1970's" (2000:108).

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