

# *The 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language and the Irish Speaking Communities: an Ethnographic Investigation*

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**Abstract:** *This study examines the impact of the ‘20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030’. This policy works toward the promotion and revival of Irish language usage in Ireland, particularly in the Gaeltacht (Irish speaking) regions. The research aims at ascertaining how this policy has been received by the population and assessing its effects, so far, on Irish speaking communities. Taking an ethnographic approach, the research involved participant observation and interviews conducted at twelve sites covering a variety of locations, including villages, towns and islands located in the seven Gaeltacht regions. Initial findings show the heterogeneous character of Irish-speaking regions problematic for centrally imposed policy.*

**Keywords:** *Irish Language; Gaeltacht; 20-year strategy; Ireland.*

## **Introduction**

The academic literature on the Irish language is diverse, ranging from works that focus on linguistics (Carnie 1995; Cummins 1978), on history (Cahill 2007; Pintér 2010), on national language policy (McDermott 2011), to comparative studies (Berdichevsky 2012; Sutherland 2002) and studies of rural Ireland and the Gaeltacht (Hindley 1990). Despite the significant differences with which each of these perspectives approach the Irish language, there is one element that all of them have in common: they focus on language revitalization initiatives in Ireland, whether to debate, criticize, analyze or compare. This is not surprising since language policies in Ireland, despite decades of efforts, have not been able to increase the daily use of Irish in the country. In fact, for some authors, language policies in Ireland have simply failed (Carnie 1995). Those more pessimistic among such authors have even suggested that the Irish language is on its way to extinction (Hindley 1990).

The Irish language in Ireland has been described by researchers as in irreparable decline (Carnie 1995) and as clearly endangered, according to UNESCO’s classification

of languages in danger (UNESCO 2016). Ireland has endeavored for decades to promote Irish Gaelic within its own territory to halt its rapid decline and restore Irish to even a moderate level of daily use across the nation (Carnie 1995; McDermott 2011). Whilst having official recognition as the first language of the Republic of Ireland and an official working language of the European Union (Ireland 2010), Irish government policies have not been successful in increasing the individual everyday use of the Irish language (McDermott 2011. 27).

Regardless of the failures of past revitalization policies – or perhaps because of them – the Irish government established a new and reformulated policy, ‘The 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030’. The policy document argues for the continued importance of the Irish language as it is a reference point for, and symbol of, Ireland and Irish culture, which in turn directly shapes intangible cultural aspects such as music and literature (Ireland 2010. 6). Whether this point of view is shared by the Irish people today and whether they believe this policy is in fact improving the promotion of the language is a motivating concern for this research. How has this new policy affected Irish language usage in Ireland? Do the Irish view this policy as in their interests or as a political/electoral exercise of the government? This study seeks to answer these questions by investigating the contemporary Irish scenario and evaluating the policy for language promotion and revival, focusing on its impact within Gaeltacht regions.

## **Policy**

The Irish government launched their new strategy in 2010 with the objective of promoting and rehabilitating the Irish language as a viable community and household language in Ireland. According to this strategy, “the objective of Government policy in relation to Irish is to increase on an incremental basis the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language. Specifically, the Government’s aim is to ensure that as many citizens as possible are bilingual in both Irish and English” (Ireland 2010. 3). Commenting on the new measures O’Cearbhaill argues that, “the State has now adopted a policy of language preservation as opposed to language revival” (2016). In other words, the Government recognizes the difficulties in attaining a widespread use of Irish as the country’s first language and adopts, instead, an incremental approach to increase language usage by concentrating its attention on the community level. There are four main aims listed by the government: “to increase the number of families throughout the country who use Irish as the daily language of communication” ... “provide linguistic support for the Gaeltacht as an Irish-speaking community and to recognize the issues which arise in areas where Irish is the household and community language” ... “ensure that in public discourse and in public services the use of Irish or English will be, as far as practical, a choice for the citizen to make and that over time more and more people throughout the State will choose to do their business in Irish“ ... , and, “ensure that Irish becomes more visible in our society, both as a spoken language by our citizens and also in areas such as signage and literature” (Ireland 2010. 3).

## Methodology

Regular census taking give dubious results in the number of Irish-speakers in Ireland due to the symbolic importance of the language and the tendency for non-Irish speaking Irish to declare ability. Carnie (1995) notes, for example, that questions posed to the population by Census questionnaires do not propose a clear meaning of what it is to be an Irish speaker.

Community announcements and government directives also offer potentially biased accounts of Irish language usage or importance due to the same heavily symbolic potency of the language and its fate. In an effort to retrieve some data from beyond official statistics or discourse, an ethnographic approach was chosen. By meeting with the population living in Gaeltacht areas a more nuanced understanding of the relation between policy and population could be obtained; qualitative methods were more suited for securing information about the impact of the Irish language policy on those communities it seeks to support, and doing this by utilizing participant observation, interviews, field journal and visual recording with photography.

Fieldwork was carried out in the Gaeltacht regions of Ireland over a six-month period. All seven Gaeltacht counties were visited, encompassing a total of twelve sites, which ranged from towns and villages to islands. Figure 1 depicts locations visited during the fieldwork.



Figure 1: Map of Ireland – places visited  
(Source: <http://www.udaras.ie/en/an-ghaeilge-an-ghaeltacht/an-ghaeltacht/>)

## Findings from fieldwork

Even though preliminary in nature, our study has brought to light a number of findings. One of these findings, as Berdichevsky (2002) and Sutherland (2002) have both pointed towards, is that minority languages worldwide are progressively becoming threatened by the predominance of the English language as a working language. The impact that English has had on the Irish language in Ireland is not limited to the country's history of colonialism and language imperialism but also to the current English language media saturation of Irish society from the U.K. and the U.S.A. The Irish language, like other minority languages worldwide, is decreasing in usage due to the practicality and the wider usage of English. It is possible that this might be one of the causes for the disinterest of the Gaeltacht youth in their own language, a recurring problem mentioned by various community members.

Each of the seven Gaeltacht regions have different histories, geographic situations, economies, social structures and, more importantly, contrasting conditions with regards to the use of the Irish language. This means that the Gaeltacht is not a uniform, homogeneous and coherent community, but rather, each region is unique, each context different in its own way. This heterogeneity is acknowledged in the section under the "area for action of the Gaeltacht" in the subsection "language planning in the Gaeltacht" (2010: 20-21). Although it is not explicit in the text, this "language planning" suggests that the government identifies the importance of the heterogeneity of the Gaeltacht regions in the new strategy. According to the strategy document "a language planning process will be instigated whereby a language plan will be prepared at community level for each Gaeltacht district. These plans will integrate the approach in relation to linguistic issues, education, physical planning, and social and community development" (2010:3).

It is noteworthy that the policy document dedicates comparatively few pages to language planning. The description of the language planning process, what it entails, its implementation and timeline is vague. In a sense, the reduced focus in the Gaeltacht community and its heterogeneity in this policy, seems to contradict the document's main objective, which is the increase in the use of the Irish language as a community language.

The policy document incongruously dedicates far more information on education, and this resembles language policies of the past. The difference between the current and past policies with regards to education, mentioned by McDermott (2011), is that it "is now focusing on promoting the use of Irish in civil society, business and economy in addition to traditional areas such as education" (30). The policy document also claims that "the transmission of Irish as a living language within family and between the generations" is as important as "strengthening the position of the language within our education system" which is, in fact, "a key focus of this Strategy" (Ireland 2010. 3). But, again, this statement appears at odds with the policy's overarching direction.

Of the many community members with whom I had the opportunity to speak to in the Gaeltacht regions, only two members from Spiddal had heard of the 20 Year Strategy. These two members also mentioned that the community had come together to develop a local initiative (the language planning mentioned above).

The decline of the Irish language should not be viewed as separate from the social context of each of the regions studied. These social problems include age and gender imbalance, depopulation, emigration, isolation and demoralization (Brody 1973). In his book, *Inishkillane*, Brody uses a fictionalized narrative account derived from his own fieldwork to present a holistic portrayal of rural areas in Ireland, located mostly on the western seaboard of the isle. According to him, “the changes in farming practice, re-evaluation of rural life, inter-family and interpersonal relations, the consciousness of the young – indeed the entire fabric of a social and economic system as well as the mentalities within it – draw an account of Ireland into far more general issues” (3).

While there is a lapse of time since the publication of Brody’s fictional ethnography, his observations still strike a chord; they resonate with the problems found in Gaeltacht regions to this day. Social problems such as gender imbalance and de-population are still present in the isolated rural areas of the Gaeltacht with Cape Clear standing out as one of the most striking cases. In the rural regions such as the ones visited, there has been an increase in the rate of bachelors. Women tend to receive higher educational levels and seek employment in urban areas with more opportunities, while men tend to work on family farms and look after elderly parents. According to Brody, girls are “strongly inclined against marrying a local farmer” (36) and “the disproportionate number of bachelors in the remoter communities is one of their most striking features” (1973: 39). Further, Brody mentions that, “the rate at which the young (...) leave is not however, the same for men as it is for women. Women leave when they are younger, and they leave in large numbers” (92). This type of disparity effects the family and community structure, leading to social issues such as a higher number of bachelors, lower birth rates and even depression among males. According to Brody, “bachelors are potentially the most depressed” (42).

Our findings show the problems in Gaeltacht regions are far greater than simply language and reinforces Brody’s argument that language is but a small consequence of deeper societal relations. Where there is increasingly more emigration, de-population, societal imbalances, economic disparity, there is little *practical* space for concerns with language. Language should, one might think, at least, be practical. Perhaps, until something is done comprehensively about the social and economic situation in each of these distinct areas, the language, even with all the policy support available, may still not survive.

Notwithstanding the exploratory character of the research presented here, the study revealed a number of significant findings. The research confirmed what comparativists have warned the international community about, namely that dominant languages, such as English, have been expanding and negatively affecting minority languages all around the world, not least Irish. One such comparativist, Berdichevsky (2002), has argued that all minority languages “are facing a challenge to maintain the sense of national identity in a global world dominated by English” (21) and further that, “the hard facts of life support an approach to learning languages that value practical benefits of communication, travel and career” (21). Sutherland (2000) shares the same

point of view and mentions that, “as communication between countries becomes more effective, and some languages become very widely used – English is an obvious example – languages spoken by relatively small numbers of people are likely to fall into disuse, even if there are no political pressures” (Sutherland 2000:200). Therefore, declining usage of the Irish language is no longer just a matter of historical or colonial legacies, but is now the result of a larger worldwide phenomenon faced by all minority languages.

Our research also demonstrates that the seven Gaeltacht regions in Ireland are not homogeneous. Beyond contrasts of linguistic dialects, there are significant differences between each Gaeltacht region, in relation to such variables as economy, geography and social structure. While some towns visited during the fieldwork relied primarily on a tourist-based economy, others were characterized by their reliance on agriculture. Population size also varied to a great extent among the regions visited. Furthermore, the everyday community usage of the Irish language is notably different among the Gaeltacht locations, for example, communities in Galway and Meath chose to communicate in Irish on a daily basis, whereas in the remainder of the field sites there were very little to no observed usage of the Irish language. This means that rather than regarding all Gaeltacht regions as one, policy makers should acknowledge these differences for a more efficient strategy. This is important so that the specific needs of each region, regarding the language, are taken into consideration. The community language planning process, as foreseen by the policy, was apparently, in our view, conceived to approach such differences. However, this is not clear in the policy document. There is also very little information dedicated to this issue in the 20 Year Strategy.

Most importantly, the research found that a myriad of social problems continues to plague rural isolated areas in the western seaboard of Ireland.

## **Conclusion**

It remains to be seen if the plan will achieve its goals of increasing the use of the Irish language as a community language and of “ensuring that as many citizens as possible are bilingual in both Irish and English” (Ireland 2010:3) by 2030. Without improvement of the socio-economic challenges faced by the Gaeltacht communities, it will be very unlikely that any Irish-language policy in Ireland could succeed. It is necessary that language policy officials work jointly with rural development and social development authorities. And that the problems in these regions be addressed based on their unique situation and needs. As such, we learn from the Irish experience that any language policy must be at once holistic and local; it needs to address not just the resources regards language but social and economic resources needed to allow the community that would use that language to thrive, and any such strategy must be locally coherent to the needs and challenges of regional communities regardless of any shared minority language or culture they have with other communities.

## The future

The Irish language is a multifaceted subject of study whose complexities in the contemporary context cannot be fully apprehended without considering the multiplicity of variables at play, particularly in Gaeltacht communities. The economic and social conditions are as important as linguistics to explain why the usage of a minority language might experience decline or experience revitalization.

One realization is evident upon conclusion of the fieldwork and the analysis of the findings of the present study: the subject requires further and more extensive research. There is not enough information on the linkages between social problems and language decline, on the role of community and family life in the preservation of minority languages, on the impact of generation gaps in spoken languages, on the role of broadcast media in disseminating minority language, and on the impact of the internet and the social media on minority language use by the youth, among other themes. Our own fieldwork experience in the Gaeltacht has demonstrated the need for longer ethnographical research in the area.

As the government strategy for the Irish language is in its initial implementation phases, it is also necessary to follow up on its progress, especially with regards to the community language planning processes proposed for the Gaeltacht regions. According to the language planning guidelines, in its third edition, published in 2016 by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, together with Údarás na Gaeltachta and Foras na Gaeilge, the Gaeltacht language planning areas will have two years to develop their plans, with an additional seven years for implementation. This means that it will take several years before the entire language planning initiative comes into effect. Research will be essential, therefore, to investigate this process and, along with it, further explore the outcomes of community and bottom up efforts for the survival and increase of the Irish language. The authors look forward in hope to witnessing the fruits of such endeavours.

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