

‘Is fear Gaeilge bhriste ná Béarla cliste’: Irish nationalism and the peacebuilding potential of the Irish language

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Introduction

The Irish proverb ‘*Is fear Gaeilge bhriste na Béarla cliste*’, meaning ‘*Broken Irish is better than clever English*’ offers an insight into the Irish psyche, encapsulating the fierce patriotic fervor which surrounds the Irish language, as well as the rejection of English language and culture. As such, the Irish language or *An Ghaeilge* is double-edged sword, underpinning Irish cultural identity, but in doing so becoming a powerful and polarizing symbol of Irish nationalism. Despite this, the Irish language has peacebuilding potential, as removing it from the nationalist context and updating it for modern life may address cultural insecurities which encourage Anglophobic practices. Similarly, celebrating Irish’s intersectional history could provide an opportunity for reconciliation and community-building on the island as a whole. This essay will briefly outline the historical events which led to the decline of the language. It will then illustrate the ways in which the Irish language has become a conduit for nationalist ideology. The potential of language in peacebuilding will then be discussed, and recommendations for the successful implementation of the Irish language in peacebuilding on the island of Ireland will follow.

Historical Context

The Irish language was widely spoken on the island of Ireland between the 6th and 17th centuries.¹ Today, only 4.2% of the population of the Republic of Ireland use the language daily, outside of the education system.² This decline in speakers can be attributed to a series of military conquests and plantations, beginning in 1169. English control was gradually established on the island, and English became the language of administration, opportunity and social mobility.¹ Despite this, the Irish-speaking population remained sizable until the Great Famine (1845-1851), as Erick Falc'Her-Poyroux estimates that 1.5 million native speakers of Irish died or emigrated between 1841 and 1851.³

The growing independence movement in the latter half of the century renewed public interest in Irish, as organizations such as *Conradh na Gaeilge* or the *Gaelic League*, were established to promote it.⁴ Following the partition of Ireland in 1921, the Irish Free State introduced compulsory Irish education, in the hope of reviving the language.⁵ While this aim has not yet been fully realized, Irish language education remains as important as ever in the Republic, with the Irish government aiming to create a nation of bilingual English and Irish speakers by 2030.⁶

¹ David Mitchell and Megan Miller, "Reconciliation through language learning? A case study of the Turas Irish language project in East Belfast," *Ethnic and racial studies* 42, no. 2 (2019): 239.

² Central Statistics Office, "Census 2016 Profile 10-Education, Skills and the Irish Language," Central Statistics Office, n. d. [Census 2016 Profile 10 – Education, Skills and the Irish Language - CSO - Central Statistics Office](#).

³ Erick Falc'Her-Poyroux, "The Great Famine in Ireland: A Linguistic and Cultural Disruption," Yann Bévant, *La Grande Famine en Irlande 1845-1850*, PUR, 2014. <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01147770/document>. [Google Scholar].

⁴ Mitchell and Miller, "Reconciliation through language learning?" 240.

⁵ Fionntán de Brún, *Revivalism and Modern Irish Literature: The Anxiety of Transmission and the Dynamics of Renewal* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019).

⁶ Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, "The 20-year strategy for the Irish language 2010-2030," Gov.ie, December 21, 2010, [untitled - 087bbace-b392-4671-b51a-149720d3f6ff.pdf \(www.gov.ie\)](#).

An Ghaeilge and Irish Nationalism

From the late 19th century to the present day, the Irish language has become increasingly associated with nationalist ideology in the Republic and Northern Ireland. While early 20th century manifestations of Irish nationalism were influenced by European movements, it must be recognized that the nationalist mobilization of the Irish language is the result of post-colonial cultural insecurity.

The First National Programme Conference was a convention of schoolteachers which met in 1922, to develop a primary school curriculum for the Irish Free State.⁷ Aiming to ‘conserve and develop Irish nationality’,⁸ the Conference set ambitious targets for Irish language teaching, mandating that an immersive Irish language approach was to be taken in the first two years of schooling, and that following this, history and geography were to be taught in Irish.⁹ The Conference’s approach was influenced by the European nationalist concept of the ‘cultural nation’, which is defined by shared history, religion, language or blood ties.¹⁰ In the cultural nation, language acts as a ‘visible badge’ of identity, as each state speaks a unique language to legitimize its claim to sovereignty.¹¹ The influence of this theory is evident in Irish politics of the 1920s, as institutions like *Conradh na Gaeilge* maintained that the Irish language and nation were inseparable.¹² Likewise, the use of language education to establish a new culturally ‘Irish’

⁷ Thomas Walsh, “Revival or bilingualism? The impact of European nationalist thinking on Irish language curricular policy around the advent of political independence in Ireland,” *Paedagogica Historica* 59, no. 2 (2023): 257.

⁸ Eoin MacNiell, “Irish Educational Policy II,” *Irish Statesman*, October 24, 1925, 200.

⁹ National Programme Conference, *National Programme of Primary Instruction* (Dublin: The Educational Company of Ireland 1922), 13.

¹⁰ Walsh, “Revival or bilingualism?” 252-253.

¹¹ Walsh, “Revival or bilingualism?” 253.

¹² Douglas Hyde, “The Necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland,” Paper delivered before the Irish National Literary

nation was inspired by European nationalism, as similar nation-wide systems of education were developed on the continent with the aim of constructing a sense of national identity.¹³

Building on this principle, the Irish language took on symbolic meaning in the Free State, not only legitimizing the claim to nationhood, but also appeasing fears of cultural absorption into the ‘English-speaking races.’¹⁴ As such, it represents separation from Ireland’s colonial past, differentiating the new Irish nation from the colonial oppressor and rejecting English culture and customs. Moreover, the Irish language was employed by the republican movement during the Troubles in the 1980s.¹⁵ By using the Irish language as part of their campaign, Irish republicans simultaneously aligned themselves with the Republic and rejected the British state. Hence, the Irish language became a facet of Republican identity-building during the Troubles, with some prisoners in Long Kesh prison teaching themselves the language.¹⁶ In Northern Irish Protestant communities, the Irish language is also strongly symbolic of Irish nationalism, and can have an alienating effect. Mitchell and Miller write; ‘For many Protestants, this association with their political opponents has imbued the language with an alien and threatening meaning’.¹ Indeed, the Irish language has continued to be the subject of political controversy in Northern Ireland in recent years, as debate over the official status of the Irish language led to Sinn Féin boycotts of Stormont between 2007 and 2011.

Society in Dublin, November 25, 1892, <https://www.thefuture.ie/wp-content/uploads/1892/11/1892-11-25-The-Necessity-For-De-Anglicising-Ireland.pdf>.

¹³ Walsh, “Revival or Bilingualism?” 254.

¹⁴ Margaret O’Callaghan, “Language, nationality and cultural identity in the Irish Free State, 1922-7: *the Irish Statesman* and the *Catholic Bulletin* reappraised,” *Irish Historical Studies* 24, no. 94 (1984): 240.

¹⁵ Diarmait Mac Giolla Chríost, “A Question of National Identity or Minority Rights? The Changing Status of the Irish Language in Ireland Since 1922,” *Nations and Nationalism* 18, no. 3 (2012): 408.

¹⁶ Feargal Mac Ionnrachtaigh, *Language, Resistance and Revival: Republican Prisoners and the Irish Language in the North of Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 3.

***An Ghaeilge* and Peacemaking**

Despite the Irish language's strong nationalist associations, it must be recognized that language is rarely the cause of ethnic conflict,¹⁷ and that it can in fact become a powerful peacebuilding tool. Mitchell and Miller note that language learning can have a unifying effect in post-conflict societies, promoting reconciliation by humanizing speakers and learners, offering insight into a group's history, culture and experience and challenging feelings of language exclusivity.¹⁸

The *Turas* or *Journey* project has harnessed this peacebuilding power since its establishment in 2011. Part of the Methodist Church's *East Belfast Mission* initiative, *Turas* runs a series of Irish language courses and workshops (predominantly but not exclusively) for East Belfast's Protestant community.¹⁹ As a peacebuilding initiative, *Turas* challenges the concept of the Irish language as the exclusive property of Catholic nationalists, educating participants about Protestant links to the language. Many Scottish Presbyterian settlers who arrived in Ulster in the 1600s were speakers of the closely related Scots Gaelic. Consequently, communities of Irish-speaking Presbyterians sprang up in Belfast in the 1700 and 1800s, some of which established periodicals or societies to promote Irish language and Gaelic culture.⁴ By teaching Irish to East Belfast Protestants and informing them about their connection to the language, *Turas* challenges the power of Irish in nationalist politics, reframing it as an element of island-wide cultural history. In doing so, *Turas* makes important strides in depoliticizing the Irish language, while maintaining its cultural integrity.

¹⁷ David Laitin, "Language, Conflict and Violence: The Straw That Strengthens the Camel's Back," *European Journal of Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2000): 97-137.

¹⁸ Mitchell and Miller, "Reconciliation through language learning?" 238.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 241.

Additionally, the Irish language could be used to address cultural insecurity and divisive nationalist practices. Breen-Smyth writes that the suffering generated by key moments in history or ‘iconic events’ may be incorporated into identity.²⁰ This suffering engenders feelings of victimhood, which encourage the formation of suffering-based ‘identity groups.’ Thus, communities of sufferers are created, fostering feelings of collective victimhood, which can span generations.²¹ For example, the English plantations of Ireland could be viewed as iconic events in the decline of the Irish language, resulting in lasting consequences for Irish life and culture, which are experienced by contemporary citizens of Ireland. The lack of a widely spoken *unique* language deepens Irish cultural insecurity, questioning the legitimacy of the Irish state under the mandates of European nationalism and acting as a reminder of cultural similarity with the colonial oppressor. The result is a deep resentment for the colonial power, which manifests itself as a rejection of English cultural practices to create cultural separation. For example, the First National Programme Conference was adamant that no English literature should be included on the curriculum²² and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) banned the playing of ‘foreign’ sports such as soccer and rugby on GAA grounds until 2005.²³ The potential consequences of anti-British sentiment on the island of Ireland are alarming, particularly in recent times, as the 25th Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement saw an increased risk of politically motivated violence.²⁴ Expanding the Irish speaking population and realizing the aims of the 20-Year

²⁰ Marie Breen-Smyth, “The Uses of Suffering: Victims as Moral Beacons or Icons of Grievance,” in *The Politics of Victimhood in Post-Conflict Societies*, ed. Vincent Druliolle and Roddy Brett (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 214.

²¹ Breen-Smyth, “The Uses of Suffering,” 221.

²² National Programme Conference, *National Programme*, 5.

²³ Gareth Fulton and Alan Bairner, “Sport, space and national identity in Ireland: the GAA Croke Park and Rule 42,” *Space and Polity* 11, no. 1 (2007):55-74.

²⁴ See “Northern Ireland police have ‘strong intelligence’ of attacks being planned against officers on Easter Monday,” *Sky News*, April 7, 2023, [Northern Ireland police have 'strong intelligence' of attacks being planned against officers on Easter Monday | UK News | Sky News](#).

Strategy could alleviate this cultural insecurity, reducing the necessity to assert cultural independence through Anglophobic practices. This in turn would challenge the sense of collective victimhood which engenders such insecurities, giving agency to the people of Ireland. Hence, the peacemaking opportunities offered by the Irish language are not to be ignored, despite its weighty political baggage.

Suggestions for the mobilization of *An Ghaeilge* in peacemaking

a) *Irish Language Peace Education*

Despite the Republic's involvement in the Northern Irish conflict and peace process, there is no element of official peace education on the primary or secondary school syllabi. I propose developing an Irish language peace education module to be taught in Irish-teaching schools on both sides of the border, as well as by independent language projects such as *Turas*. Such a module would not only add a positive and peaceful connotation to the language, challenging its nationalist associations, but would also support linguistic development, helping to realize the aim of the 20-Year Strategy.

Content and Language Integrate Learning or CLIL involves teaching non-language modules (content modules) through the target language, while supporting linguistic development in dedicated classes.²⁵ There are two systems of education in Ireland: English medium schools (EMS) where Irish is taught only in isolated language classes and Irish medium schools (IMS) where content modules are taught through Irish. Students in IMS tend to be more proficient in

²⁵ D. Coyle, P. Hood and D. Marsh, *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

Irish than those in EMS,²⁶ however, a lack of support for language learning²⁷ means that IMS learners still do not achieve near-native competence in the Irish language.²⁸ Integrating an Irish language peace education module into the curriculum could help to develop a CLIL approach to Irish teaching, combining language and content modules. A combined language and peace education module would give EMS students the opportunity to practice capabilities outside of the language classroom, and IMS students could use the module as a springboard to address any linguistic issues which arose in the peacemaking discussions. Improving the standard of Irish which students leave schools with, is an important step towards the bilingualism outlined in the 20-Year Strategy, providing Ireland with a unique language and perhaps satisfying the urge towards cultural differentiation without resorting to Anglophobic means. Similarly, the peacebuilding cross-border content of the module would help to recontextualize the Irish language in a positive political sense, by employing it in a context of reconciliation, challenging associations with militant republicanism.

b) Irish as a whole-island initiative

The Irish language has survived outside of society in rural and isolated communities. Due to this, lexical gaps arise when Irish is used in modern society, and the language is in need of modernization. This essay has demonstrated that the Irish language is heavily associated with nationalism and republican violence, however, adding words which relate to modern every-day life to the language would bring this cornerstone of Irish identity into the 21st century, giving it a

²⁶ See P. Ó Duibhir, *Immersion Education: Lessons From a Minority Language Context* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2018) and T. J. Ó Ceallaigh and A. Ní Shiaghda, *I dTreo Barr Feabhais: Dea-Chleachtais san Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge* (Dublin: Gaeloideachas, 2017).

²⁷ T. W. Fortune, D. J. Tedick and D. J. Walker, "Integrated Language and Content Teaching: Insights from the Immersion Classroom," in *Pathways to Multilingualism: Evolving Perspectives on Immersion Education*, ed. T.W. Fortune and D. J. Tedick (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2008), 89.

²⁸ L. Cammarata and D. J. Tedick, "Balancing Content and Language in Instruction: The Experience of Immersion Teachers," *The Modern Language Journal* 96, no. 2 (2012): 253.

new forward-facing outlook and uprooting it from the violent past. Currently, the database *Téarma* or *Term* manages new entries to the Irish lexicography. *Téarma* is maintained by the Irish language unit of Dublin City University and the terminology unit of *Foras na Gaeilge* (*The Foundation for Irish*). *Foras na Gaeilge* advises on Irish language issues north and south of the border and while the inclusion of Northern Irish speakers in *Foras na Gaeilge*'s overall operation is encouraging, more could be done to harness the community-building element of language modernization. Mobilizing and involving the public via social media could make this possible. Mitchell and Miller found that while *Turas* piqued an interest for Irish in Protestant communities, several of the participants were reluctant to tell friends or family about their involvement with the Irish language.²⁹ The anonymity provided by the internet could combat this issue, as well as that of prior knowledge of the language, as voting polls supported by audio-visual media about pronunciation and the meaning of word stems could be used to engage communities of speakers of all abilities all over the island. Alternatively, the project could adopt a traditional intersectional dialogue approach, bringing together communities of speakers or schools from across the island to identify and fill the lexical gaps which they encounter.

While *Turas* aims to connect Protestant unionists with their Irish-speaking pasts, a language-building initiative could achieve a similar aim with a forward-facing approach. Rather than using the past which is ridden with conflict to create a sense of shared culture between Protestants and Catholics, nationalists and unionists on the island, the modernization project could help to develop the same sense of shared cultural experience, through participation in the creation of an Irish language which fits the needs of modern life.

²⁹ Mitchell and Miller, "Reconciliation through language learning?" 247.

Conclusion

The overt nationalism which has surrounded the Irish language for more than a century may make it difficult to see how it could be employed in the field of peacebuilding. While it is true that Irish has become symbolic of the nationalist movement, it must be remembered that this is a product of recent history and politics. The identity-building power of Irish cannot and should not be ignored, however. By breaking down myths of the language's exclusive use in Catholic nationalist communities, it can be employed to build a greater sense of whole-island community, shared history and culture. Similarly, the language's role as a symbol of cultural differentiation need not be changed, but rather realized in order to ease fears of cultural absorption, and potentially replace other more antagonistic cultural displays. While divisive sentiments like '*Is fear Gaeilge bhriste ná Béarla cliste*' (*Broken Irish is better than clever English*) have dominated the Irish language for more than a century, reinvigorating it with modern life in mind could help Ireland to turn away from the violent and traumatic past, and look towards a more secure and peaceful future.

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