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3

Language, ideology and national identity

Language has operated as a vehicle for debates concerned with cultural identity and political legitimacy in Ireland for much of its modern history. While the incorporation of Ireland into the United Kingdom by the Act of Union of 1800 marks a milestone in the cultural no less than the constitutional history of Ireland, the direction and dynamic of the 'language shift', from Irish to English as the general vernacular, were already well established and, as it seemed, irreversible, by the end of the eighteenth century.

Language and, even more crucially, religion, were the key elements of cultural discrimination in the great convulsion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the outcome of which was the establishment of a Protestant, overwhelmingly planter, new ruling class in Ireland, together with the triumph of the English language, law and politico-administrative institutions throughout Ireland, and the defeat of the whole institutional edifice of the Gaelic political and social order which had sustained and been mediated through the Irish language.

In the centuries that followed, language, together with religion, remained at the centre of the debate on Irish culture, community and identity. But the language shift to English, the language of power and of all the avenues to advancement, soon gathered momentum among those who aspired to improve their condition or to progress and participate fully in the life of the country under the new order. By the late eighteenth century, Irish was already considered the language of the past and of the poor; not only by the planter society, but by the emerging Catholic middle class in town and countryside, who, while continuing to use Irish in transactions or social intercourse with the lower orders, had themselves made the transition to English as the language of their domestic as well as

their public lives. For the literate, Irish was still largely a scribal language of manuscripts, with only a limited presence in the world of print.

Within this central process of language shift, however, there were complex sub-themes. From the outset some Protestants of planter stock had shown an interest in Gaelic culture, and the Irish language, either from an antiquarian or a practical evangelising impulse. In the later eighteenth century, a renewed interest among a minority of the ruling élite (mainly 'patriotic' Protestants of planter descent) in the nature of Irish cultural particularity, allied to an encounter with early European Romanticism, resulted in the first of a series of 'Celtic Revivals' in Ireland, the scholarly and antiquarian fruits of which included the founding of the Royal Irish Academy in 1785.

From the late eighteenth century, a further elaboration of concepts of identity and peoplehood congealed into the political ideology of nationalism. Among the disciples of the new political nationalism in Ireland from the later eighteenth century there were a few thinkers, notably Thomas Davis, who were especially alert to the cultural implications of the constitutional-legal claims being made for an autonomous Irish 'state' on behalf of an 'Irish nation'.

But while these currents – of antiquarianism and early cultural nationalism – carried forward into the nineteenth century, the actual position of the two main vernacular languages in the first decades of the nineteenth century reveals a complex bilingual society. It is estimated that Ireland in 1800 had a population of 2 million Irish-speakers, 1.5 million Irish–English bilinguals and 1.5 million English speakers. Notwithstanding the continuing language shift, the numbers of Irish speakers probably increased up to 1845. This was because Irish was very much the language of the poor, and it was among the poor that population increase was greatest in the pre-Famine decades. The Great Famine of 1845–50 decimated Irish-speaking Ireland through death and emigration. The 1851 census (which included a 'language question' for the first time) revealed that the total number of Irish-speakers had fallen to 1.52 million or just 25 per cent of the population, and would continue to fall. As Helen and Máirtín Ó Murchú have written: 'a precipitant shift to English was underway . . . So it continued. By 1891, for the whole of Ireland, the percentage of Irish-speakers in the under ten group had declined to 3.5 per cent and the language appeared to be on the point of extinction.'[1]

The massive abandonment of Irish as a vernacular language during the nineteenth century is a remarkable event in Irish cultural history.

Given that a key axis of ideological and political contestation throughout the Union era (1800–1921) was the very legitimacy of the Union framework itself (as outlined in chapter 1), it might be expected that in the nationalist critique of the legitimacy and benefit of the Union connection, the language shift in Ireland would feature prominently in nationalist political movements. Yet, with a few notable exceptions, this was not the case until the closing decade of the nineteenth century.

In fact, English was the dominant language of all Irish nationalist popular political movements from the United Irishmen of the late eighteenth century through to the nineteenth century. In print and on platform, the political propaganda of nineteenth-century Irish nationalism was conducted through English. Political leadership was crucial. The great popular tribune, the Catholic lawyer, Daniel O'Connell, leader of mass movements for Catholic Emancipation and Repeal of the Union in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, was himself a native speaker of Irish who held a fatalistic view of the inevitable decline of Irish. Moreover, he viewed this prospect with relative equanimity. In this he was typical of the advancing Catholic bourgeoisie, who were generally content to salute the glories of the Gaelic past, while mobilising to construct a strong national identity based upon their already historically founded religious identity as the 'Catholic Irish nation' coming into its own after enduring the long night of persecution and discrimination.

The intellectuals of the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s were more alert to the message of cultural nationalism and the centrality of language in its tenets. Thomas Davis, in particular, strongly advocated an essentialist position for the Irish language in the construction of a credible Irish national identity. However, the medium of preaching and propaganda for the Young Irelanders was English, particularly in their influential newspaper, the *Nation*. Among the separatist Fenians of the post-Famine decades, there were individuals who were alarmed at the decline of the Irish language, but they conducted their public politics, whether at home or among the Irish diaspora, overwhelmingly through English. The same is true of the Home Rule movement. The achievement of political self-rule, and the form of that political sovereignty – a republic or a native parliament – were the chief concerns of these political movements; the role of language in identity-formation was not a central issue.

The leaders of the Catholic church were, in the main, reconciled to, if not actively encouraging of, the language shift. Individual bishops

and priests had concerns for the pastoral care of Irish-speaking congregations, which prompted them to require competence in Irish of those charged with such care. A minority channelled their affection for the language into the collection or commissioning of manuscripts and the support of scribes. But there was no satisfactory provision for the teaching of Irish at the national seminary at Maynooth, Co. Kildare, throughout most of the nineteenth century, nor was there satisfactory provision of catechetical or devotional literature in Irish. Furthermore, as the Irish Catholic church began to take on the role of a missionary church, among the Irish of the diaspora and in the English-speaking lands in general, English was the language of their mission. The Irish spiritual empire of the modern period was English speaking.

Perhaps the most energetic attention to the actual community of Irish-speakers on pragmatic grounds came from Protestant evangelical societies from the 1790s to the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Élite Protestant patronage of scholarship and antiquities continued throughout the nineteenth century. But the increasing association of all aspects of Irish patriotic or national sentiment with political nationalism, from the Young Ireland movement forward, resulted in a recoil from involvement in 'Irish' cultural projects by Protestants whose politics were Unionist. This became most pronounced in Ulster where, in the intense political polarisation of the Home Rule crisis of 1886–1914, the habit of seeing 'British' and 'Irish' as mutually exclusive versions of cultural identity (a habit also indulged in by advanced Irish-Irelanders of the same era) was to have a major influence on the disposition of the Northern Ireland state after 1920 towards cultural identity and the role of language.

The post-Union state – the British state – was central to the language shift and the politics of language in Ireland. The role of the state expanded significantly during the nineteenth century; that is to say, it increasingly reached into different aspects of the lives of ordinary people. So far as the bilingual character of Irish society was concerned, the state only recognised one of those languages. This reflected the ideological assumptions of the imperial British state regarding assimilation, improvement and progress. In effect, becoming literate in English was seen as an essential enabling stage on the path to progress and civility for the Irish people. Thus, in the expanding reach of state activity in policing, public works schemes, ordnance survey mapping, poor relief systems, and, most crucially, in the state-directed system of elementary 'national' education introduced in 1831, English achieved ever-deepening

penetration, both geographically and socially. Only in the closing decades of the nineteenth century did the state demonstrate a more permissive attitude towards the presence of Irish in the education system, partly in response to lobbying from educationalists and language activists, partly because the overwhelming dominance of English suggested that indulging the Celtic strain as an exotic ornament on the broader British culture posed no threat.

With such powerful forces driving the advance of English, and the fatalism towards the language which was the historical legacy of the defeat and inexorable abandonment of Irish since the sixteenth century, the story of any actions to counter this language shift is very much a chronicle of unavailing efforts made by numerous individuals, in Ireland and among the emigrant Irish in Britain and America, to make a stand for the preservation of Irish as a living language. But there is no sustained organisational effort until late in the nineteenth century.

It is from the last two decades of the nineteenth century that we come upon those ideas and programmes regarding cultural renewal, and language 'revival', that are commonly referred to as 'the philosophy of Irish-Ireland' or 'the Gaelic League idea'. The timing of this stirring of ideas was not accidental, and neither was its focus. By the closing decade of the nineteenth century, some form of devolved self-government or Home Rule for Ireland seemed imminent. At the same time, the census returns were clearly indicating that the death of the Irish language seemed now inevitable and hardly less imminent. It was at this juncture that a deliberate project of 'decolonisation' was formulated and adopted by a group of intellectuals and artists with, in time, significant support from a larger constituency of political activists who were to form the nucleus of the political leadership of the new Irish state eventually established in 1922.

Language was a central preoccupation of this project. Indeed, coming to terms with the language/identity predicament in late nineteenth-century Ireland would, in different ways, inspire and torment W. B. Yeats and his collaborators in the Irish Literary Revival, as it did the young James Joyce even as he went into exile.

While there were precursor 'revivalist' initiatives from the 1870s, the appropriate starting point for discussion of the cultural project of language 'restoration' is probably Douglas Hyde's seminal 1892 lecture, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland'. While Hyde became committed to the 'extension of our [Irish] language among the people', he was especially exercised to preserve Irish as a living language among the base

community of Irish-speakers whose vernacular it still was. By the late nineteenth century, these were largely concentrated in areas in the western counties of the Atlantic coast. When Hyde, with others, founded the Gaelic League in 1893, the primary objective of the new movement was declared to be 'The preservation of Irish as the National language of Ireland and the extension of its use as a spoken tongue.'

The League's objective of preservation and extension reflected Hyde's basic propositions regarding language and identity and the need for socio-cultural regeneration in late nineteenth-century Ireland. Hyde claimed that the purpose of the language revival mission was 'to render the present a rational continuation of the past'. For Hyde and his fellow Gaelic League enthusiasts, it would be a catastrophe if the continuity of cultural tradition, articulated and given form principally through language, were to be ruptured. Such a cultural tradition encompassed thoughts, feelings, perceptions and wisdom, a distinctive world-view based on a unique set of values. The case made for cultural continuity, through the medium of Irish, and, therefore, for language revival, rested on a set of assumptions and propositions that combined elements of general humanism with specific tenets of cultural nationalism.

Hyde's understanding of the relationship between language, thought and identity was unremarkable for his time. He quoted approvingly Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville's definition of language as 'the form of our thoughts during every instant of our existence'.[2] The abandonment of a language, therefore, to say nothing of its enforced abandonment, inevitably involved a disorientating rupture in cultural continuity at several levels; not only an alienation from landscape (placenames) and inherited historical narratives and communal myths, but also a deep psychological trauma, at an individual and communal level, caused by the loss of a rich inherited matrix of wisdom and knowledge. This elemental trauma, it was believed, had been exacerbated by a number of features particular to the language change in Ireland – in particular, a sense that the loss of Irish was the outcome of military and political conquest. The abandonment of the native communal language in the face of the dominant new language of the conqueror became internalised as part of the shame of defeat, dispossession, humiliation and impoverishment – the classic condition of the colonised.

The specifically cultural nationalist aspects of Hyde's propositions were shared by many of his contemporaries. The Irish continued to insist that they were a distinct nation, and demanded a national state.

Yet they were abandoning the most distinctive mark of nationhood, the Irish language. This debilitating contradiction could only be resolved by reversing the language shift of recent centuries. For Hyde and the Gaelic League activists the restoration of the Irish language as the national vernacular was the cornerstone of this project of national reconstruction, a healthy identity being a prerequisite for a reconstruction of the social and economic fabric and the collective energy and self-belief of the national community.

Of course, the alternative badge of communal identity in Ireland was religion. Religious identity was, for historical reasons, deeply and pervasively communal in Ireland, but also a divisive and exclusive instrument of cultural differentiation. This strong communal sense of religious identity would inevitably present a challenge to nationalist theorists seeking an inclusive definition of Irish identity, and specifically to a project of cultural revival based upon language as the key marker of identity. Indeed, the search for an alternative to the divisive religious affiliation as a defining mark of Irish identity goes some way towards explaining the disproportionate prominence of Protestants among the theorists of Irish linguistic nationalism.

One further feature of Hyde's claim for the revival of Irish was that it was not simply a general plea for the cultural particularity encoded in language to be allowed to live and develop, but a specific set of claims for the kind of cultural differentiation, which marked off the Irish from the English. This, it must be said, was fairly representative of the stereotyping common to cultural commentary in the later nineteenth century, benignly voiced by Ernst Renan, Matthew Arnold and others, but with its more morbid versions formulated in racist discourse. In effect, the artistic and imaginative and spiritual Celts were contrasted with the solid, practical and materialist Anglo-Saxons. A version of this particular stereotyping also informed Yeats and his collaborators in the enterprise of establishing an authentic Irish national literature in Hiberno-English, and certain Gaelic Leaguers gave the formula a more deeply religious hue.

Hyde's main collaborator in founding the Gaelic League, the historian, Eoin MacNéill, also emphasised the need for spiritual as well as social renewal in Ireland. Where MacNéill diverged from Hyde, perhaps, was in his emphasis on the way in which the glories of the Gaelic tradition and inheritance, still resonating in the living Irish vernacular, emerged from the uniquely rich cultural fusion of the Celtic genius with

the light of Christianity. Again, the journalist and propagandist, D. P. Moran, describing Ireland's cultural predicament as 'a battle of civilisations', produced a more schematic model than Hyde of cultural absorption (with the Gael as the matrix absorbing all later arrivals), and a more astringently sectarian tone.

With partition and the establishment of the two states in Ireland in 1920–22, the language situation changed fundamentally. Two confessional states came into being, with mutually exclusive totalising official versions of cultural identity. Northern Ireland existed because it had rejected Home Rule in order to remain British. Its official identity would remain resolutely British, giving no recognition or place in its public life to such unambiguous symbols of distinctive 'Irishness' as the Irish language. The nationalist minority's general stance of cultural dissent within Northern Ireland included, for many, support for the Irish language. Seamus Heaney has described the language situation in Northern Ireland as inculcating a 'binary thinking about language. I tended to conceive of Irish and English as adversarial tongues, as either/or conditions rather than both/and'.[3] This binary thinking affected more than language in the life of the Northern state.

So far as the independent Irish state is concerned, its official culture was determinedly un-British. It is generally accepted that the first generation of political leaders of the Irish Free State included a significant cohort who had been influenced, some profoundly, by the cultural movements at the turn of the century, and by the Gaelic League in particular. Indeed, it could be argued that the Gaelic League created, in effect, the political élite of independent Ireland. This may be overstating the case. But the leaders of the main political groupings in the new state accepted that the government of an independent Irish state had an obligation to give official recognition and strong support to the Irish language, the principal marker of that Irish nationality on whose behalf a national state had been demanded. Accordingly, the Irish language was given privileged status in the constitution of the Irish Free State and this was repeated in the Constitution of 1937, which declared it the first official language of the state.

Moreover, in terms of government policies, in the 1920s and 1930s Irish was declared an obligatory subject in the school curriculum, for public examinations, and for entry to various branches of the public service. A range of incentives were introduced to encourage its use more widely within the apparatus of the state and in the wider society. With

subsidised publications, a presence in the arts and broadcasting, and significant symbolic recognition for Irish (in the nomenclature of state offices and services, public companies, ritual use on solemn state occasions, frequent, if inconsistent use by many prominent leaders in all walks of life) it would be wrong to say that no progress was made. By the 1950s, a substantial cohort of secondary bilinguals, of varying levels of competence, had emerged from the schools, and Irish had achieved a degree of penetration and a presence in public domains in Ireland from which it had been excluded for many centuries.

Yet this achievement fell very short of the radical cultural project of decolonisation proclaimed by the more advanced Gaelic Leaguers. The constitutional status of Irish was not translated into statutory legal rights for Irish-speakers; the ritual symbolic use was often minimalist and increasingly seen as tokenism; the degree of real penetration by Irish even within the state services and the apparatus of government was very limited; and, above all, the actual base-communities or enclaves of Irish-speakers – the *Gaeltacht* communities – continued to contract at an alarming rate, due to the ravages of emigration and the continuing shift to English within the diminished communities. There seemed to be no coherent state strategy for arresting this accelerating decline.

In seeking explanations for this, however qualified, 'failure' of the cultural project of the Gaelic League and its political offspring, the nature of the new Irish state demands attention. In terms of economic and social power structures, the Irish Free State was from its inception conservative of existing interests. The state was also deeply confessional, predictably, perhaps, given the overwhelmingly large (over 90 per cent) majority of observing Roman Catholics among its citizens. Its civic culture was deeply imbued with a Catholic ethos. Indeed, the sheer size of the Catholic majority (as a result of the partition of the island), and the historic experience of Irish Catholics since the sixteenth century, meant that a strong communal identity based on religious loyalty was, so to speak, ready-made and available to the Irish Free State at its foundation. This Catholic communal identity was easily shared and culturally comfortable even for elements of the nationalist political leadership who, at a cerebral level, had a more inclusive, religiously pluralistic and republican version of 'Irishness' than that suggested by simple 'Catholic nationalist' sentiment. In fact, a language dimension to Irish identity which demanded nothing too burdensome, nothing beyond a symbolic recognition of the ancestral language and a care to ensure its presence in the ceremony and ritual of occasions of state, was probably the ideal 'finishing' of identity for many Irish Catholics, utterly secure in the historical identity and the civic culture defined and shaped by their religion.

The growing assurance of the Irish Free State in the decades after 1922 as a stable democratic entity in a very turbulent world meant that the Irish state came to be taken for granted by its citizens, and Irishness (or 'identity') became, as it were, a function of citizenship of the independent Irish state – a comfort not available to the Irish nationalists living in Northern Ireland, for whom issues of identity (and with them language) remained inevitably more fraught.

It would be wrong to suggest that some at least of the cadre of political leaders in the new state did not wish and work for a more substantial cultural change, and specifically for more substantial progress in respect of the 'preservation and extension' of the Irish language. Their own understanding of the enormity and complexity of the task being undertaken may, in retrospect, be seen as seriously deficient. Irish had been in a perilous state by the late nineteenth century. Moreover, the geocultural location of Ireland in the twentieth century, right in the middle of the Anglo-American highway of communications and entertainment, increasingly the main artery of a global technology whose dominant language was English, made the challenge of achieving any viable form of bilingualism – to say nothing of a reverse language 'shift' – especially daunting.

The large majority of monoglot English-speakers in Ireland at the turn of the century, and the reassuringly high status achieved by the 'English of Ireland' in the forum of world literature (W. B. Yeats's Nobel Prize came in 1923, George Bernard Shaw's two years later, while James Joyce's *Ulysses* was first published in 1922), as well as its robustly creative energies in all aspects of popular culture, further weighted the advantages in favour of English being overwhelmingly the dominant vernacular and of its continuing to erode the fragile base of the Irish-speaking community. English was also the language of the vast majority of the Irish of the diaspora and of the countries in which most of them had settled. And, for the leaders of the Irish Catholic Church, English was a vital instrument in their dynamic global missionary effort from the middle of the nineteenth century forward.

Signs of impatience and frustration with the progress of the language 'revival' were unmistakable from the later 1930s. The sincerity and commitment of political leaders was vigorously questioned, as was

the effectiveness of the particular strategies and methods employed in the implementation of state language policy. A crop of new voluntary language organisations was established from around 1940 forward – concerned with publishing, communications and evangelising in key sectors. Many saw these developments as signs of new life and energy among the Irish-language community.

But for committed revivalists there were ample grounds for anxiety. The core-communities of Irish-speakers in the *Gaeltacht* continued to decline. No new 'communities' of secondary bilinguals were being established; no medium-sized town or urban area became substantially Irish speaking in its everyday life. Teachers and educationalists, upon whom the main responsibility for 'achieving' the language restoration breakthrough in the schools depended, became weary of being relentlessly exhorted on the language issue, while being ignored on the broad agenda of education needs and career issues with which they were chiefly preoccupied. There was loss of support for the revival from sections of the intelligentsia, mainly writers, whose critique of the oppressive conservatism and confessional claustrophobia of the culture of the Irish state increasingly identified the state Irish language policy, especially the formulaic exhortations and heavy bureaucratic aspects of its implementation, as one more aspect of the sterility of the 'official' culture of the new state.

The most radical response to the evidence of failure in maintaining or sustaining the *Gaeltacht* community came from groups of political and social activists within the *Gaeltacht* community itself, supported by a cadre of urban intellectuals. The Irish writer and political activist, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, was prominent and influential in this movement. Ó Cadhain came to adopt a recognisably Marxist position (with strong Gramscian elements) on the language question and the depopulation, through emigration, of the *Gaeltacht*. The cultural hegemony of English was the outcome of socio-economic interests inherent in the power structure; the breaking of this cultural hegemony, therefore, would require a revolutionary socialist assault on these power structures and the interests they served. Or, as he put it: *Sí athréimniú na Gaeilge athghabháil na hÉireann* ('The restoration of Irish means the repossession of the country').

Less radical language revivalists sought, at different times and in different ways, to advise, cajole, persuade, bully and shame the government of the day into showing more urgency and giving a higher political priority (and resources) to the language task than successive governments

seemed prepared to do. Revivalists with some more sophisticated and scholarly understanding of the socio-linguistic complexities of language change, and of the need for sustained and intelligent language planning at state level, suffered their own frustrations when regularly finding government ministers and bureaucrats indifferent to their advice.

Yet, it is remarkable how little fundamental rethinking of the basic assumptions of the language revival project took place within the revival movement in the early decades of the state. The basic ideology of the Gaelic League continued to be articulated in much the same terms as those of the founders. Indeed, as late as 1964, a group of eminent scholars and leaders of the language revival movement, in the Report of a special government commission established to review the 'progress' of the Irish revival project to date, stated the *raison d'être* of the revival in terms almost identical to the terms used by Douglas Hyde and Eoin MacNéill. But the government response to this Report struck a new note, with positive references to the contribution of both vernaculars to Ireland's cultural stock, and with a viable bilingual society as the declared objective of policy.

In fact, the late 1950s and early 1960s mark a significant shift in government policy and in the public debate on the language issue in independent Ireland. Voices critical of the language revival policy of the state began to grow in volume and to address even the basic assumptions (as distinct from the effectiveness and implementation of policy) of the language revival project. This public interrogation of the role of language in state ideology and policy was taking place, however, in the context of a profound crisis of confidence in the entire project of national independence and state-formation in Ireland.

The 1950s was a crisis decade in independent Ireland. Poor economic growth and massive unemployment and emigration, together with the unmistakable evidence that the political energies and agendas of the post-revolutionary generation seemed utterly exhausted, resulted in a rejection of the protectionist (cultural no less than economic) policies which had marked the de Valera era since the 1930s, and the posing of fundamental questions about the whole project of Irish independence. The old political guard was moving on and with it much of the old rhetoric. Economic protectionism, the nationalist route to self-sufficiency, was abandoned, and free trade for a competitive small open economy was announced as the road to salvation. That road was to lead to membership of the European 'Common Market' (later the European

Union). The language of cultural protectionism became an embarrassment; the future prospects for the Irish language would lie in a bilingual pluralist Ireland, in which the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of Europe would provide just the setting and the stimulus needed to enable the Irish to become confident of their identity in the larger European family, in contrast to the difficulties experienced within the more claustrophobic Anglo-American grid. Optimists saw this final renunciation of the deeply 'protectionist' nationalism of Eamon de Valera as a welcome opening of the shutters and a breath of fresh air. Others were not so sure; there were some critics who analysed the failures of the Free State in standard neocolonialist terms.

The fact that the state did not insist on Irish – the first language of the Constitution – being granted status as an official language of the European Union at the time of Ireland's accession to the 'Common Market' in 1972 was a significant sign of the changing complexion of Irish 'identity politics'.[4] Furthermore, the widening access of educational opportunity in Ireland from the 1970s was accompanied by new kinds of schools and structures, by the relaxation of the Irish language requirement for state examinations, and by a new rhetoric on the objectives of education policy which valorised economic development and moved the language question down the agenda.

Paradoxically, as the state's declared objective in language policy shifted from an essentialist, restoration position on Irish, towards a more viable bilingual society, the Irish language community began to undertake new initiatives and to exert political pressure on successive governments to provide better support and services and to vindicate the language rights of Irish speakers. A new crop of educated *Gaeltacht* activists, using the language and methods of civil rights agitation then sweeping the world in the late 1960s, began to demand full civil rights (social and economic as well as cultural) for the *Gaeltacht* communities. New networks of activists began to establish Irish-language schools (*gaelscoileanna*), chiefly in growing urban areas. This renewed agitation and organisation paid dividends: a *Gaeltacht*-based all-Irish radio station (1972) and later television channel (1995), and an elected *Gaeltacht* Regional Development Authority (*Údarás na Gaeltachta*) were established, and an expanding network of Irish-language schools developed in the 1980s and 1990s.

In Northern Ireland, the explosion of long-festering conflict in the late 1960s brought back to the centre of political debate in Ireland and Britain issues of ethnicity, dignity and rights, both individual and communal, which by then had seemed largely exhausted or 'resolved' in the Irish state. Language rights featured in the contestation of identity and political legitimacy at the heart of the Northern conflict. But the increasing recognition that Ulster's historic cultural corridors were east–west (particularly to Scotland) as well as north–south within the island of Ireland enriched the debate on identity, language and cultural traditions which matured, often in a climate of lethal contestation, as an aspect of the general discourse of 'accommodation' in Northern Ireland. 'Binary thinking' on language and identity was giving way to a more open exploration of hybridity. A version of cultural pluralism had begun to emerge by the mid-1980s, as the search for political accommodation centred on parity of esteem for different cultural traditions as a prerequisite for any lasting peace.

Translation represents a complex portal between languages and cultures. The historical circumstances of modern Ireland's language shift posed, and continue to pose, particular challenges in the area of translation, for creative writers, scholars and language ideologues. Issues of authenticity and 'appropriation' punctuated the discussion of the purpose and consequence of translations from Irish to English throughout the nineteenth century. Translation was a central, and contested, aspect of the W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory-sponsored project of creating an authentic Irish literature in Hiberno-English. The Irish state from the 1930s supported translations into Irish, from English and, to a lesser extent, from other languages. The result, though of interest to later scholars, had little impact on the language situation among the population at large.

On the other hand, there was real demand for translations from Irish to English. In addition to translations of old mythological, epic and folkloric material (where there was an established 'tradition' and a proven market), translations of selections of Gaelic poetry were published, together with a number of the classic autobiographies of *Gaeltacht* writers. The reception of translations of such *Gaeltacht* works was frequently conditioned by historico-anthropological considerations, their elegiac tone announcing that they were the testament to a way of life and antique world-view that was on the eve of disappearing. This, it may be assumed, probably reinforced among English-speakers in Ireland (and elsewhere) a certain fatalism about the inevitability of the decline of the *Gaeltacht* and of Irish as the language of living communities. Translation from Irish to English may have drawn some readers to learn the original language, but it may also have provided many Irish readers with an

accessible vantage point from which to witness the vanished or vanishing world of their own forebears.

From the 1970s, translation has engrossed an increasing number of younger writers in both vernaculars. A modest body of works from languages other than English has been translated into Irish. Translation from Irish to English (and indeed to other languages) is buoyant in contemporary Ireland, with a relaxed and healthy dialogue between writers in the two languages; creative writers who write primarily in English but who have some command of Irish regularly translate or collaborate with Irish-language writers in providing English versions of works originally composed in Irish. Irish-language writers, poets in particular, are increasingly recognised internationally, as sensitive audiences throughout the world attend more closely to the works of writers in lesser-used languages. But the multiple implications of translation from minority to world languages have particular point in the context of Ireland's historical language situation.

Conclusion

By the early twenty-first century the terms of the debate in Ireland on models of language, by definition models of community, are markedly different to those that detonated in the cultural revival a century earlier. Certainly, language remains an important vehicle for debates concerned with cultural identity in Ireland, but it can scarcely be said to be the basis upon which central acts of political contestation are conducted within the main vernacular languages and their communities of users. As a site of ideological debate, the language issue – its historical predicament and contemporary position – resonates strongly primarily with cultural commentators and activists engrossed in the discourse of colonialism and post-colonialism.

At the level of popular political mobilisation, within Northern Ireland the status and significance of the Irish language (and, in a more complex manner, of Ulster Scots) remains an issue of real political consequence. Indeed, the determination of the Northern cultural nationalists to insist on a revisiting of the issue of language and identity, as part of any political accommodation based on parity of esteem for different cultural traditions, has, perhaps, been critical to the debate on language and identity in late twentieth-century Ireland. In the intensity of the political struggle in Northern Ireland from the later 1960s, a revitalised Irish-language movement emerged, strongly

urban-based and frequently embedded in the most assertive communities of republican political dissent. Schools, publications, leisure facilities, all working through the medium of Irish, demonstrated the creative energy of the activists. Given the intensity of the debate on identity in Northern Ireland in these decades, it is not altogether surprising, perhaps, that in the 1998 Belfast Agreement, the attempt to construct a lasting political accommodation between the parties to the conflict, all the parties committed themselves to 'understanding and toleration in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster Scots and the languages of various ethnic communities'.

So far as the independent Irish state of the late twentieth century is concerned, powerful waves of global liberal capitalism under American auspices have eroded much of the cultural landscape. The cultural logic of this immersion has been increased cultural homogenisation dominated by American consumerist imperatives. Ireland's membership of a European Union, whose integration seems ever deepening, has also diminished the intensity of debate and contestation on the nature and constituents of Irish identity. For the political class in general, language as an issue in Irish cultural identity seems no longer a pressing concern (though the existence of a lively Irish-language media, albeit with a minority audience, is a factor which politicians cannot afford to ignore). The language issue has largely been accommodated within the broad political discourse of minority rights in an increasingly pluralist society.

But the purpose of state support for Irish, and the terms in which even its strongest advocates now make their case, generally identifies the challenge for Irish as that of ensuring its 'survival' as a living language among the core *Gaeltacht* and the wider dispersed communities of Irish-speakers, rather than attempting its restoration as the main vernacular of a 'national community'. The cultural representation of such a national community – 'the Irish' – is increasingly concerned with public symbols and symbolic events. The Irish language is likely to remain a valued symbol of the official culture of that national community. The linguistic rights of the Irish-speaking community in its public business with the state may in time be strengthened, and state support for various initiatives and programmes of language maintenance and transmission is likely to be responsive to demand and political pressure from the Irish-speakers themselves. Indeed, a new Official Languages Act of 2003 aims at strengthening the rights and entitlements of Irish-speakers in conducting business and in communicating with public bodies and state agencies.

Whether or not this kind of state support and these community-based resources will be sufficient to ensure the transmission of the Irish language into the future is a question which will be only be answered with time. The fragility of the language as a community language in the *Gaeltacht* and the relatively thin dispersal of Irish-speakers in the wider community will have to be borne in mind. What can be stated with some certainty, however, is the proposition that an understanding of the language issue remains essential to any serious consideration of the cultural and political history of modern Ireland.

Notes

1. Helen Ó Murchú and Máirtín Ó Murchú, *Irish: Facing the Future* (Dublin: Irish Committee of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, 1999), p. 2.
2. The texts of Hyde's main exhortatory lectures have been collected in Douglas Hyde, *Language, Lore and Lyrics*, ed. Breandán Ó Conaire (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1986), especially pp. 145–99.
3. Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Translation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. xxiv.
4. In mid-2004 the Irish government announced that it intended re-opening the issue of securing 'official language' status for Irish within the EU, in the light of the expanded membership of the EU and the corresponding increase in new 'official languages'.

Further reading

Patrick J. Corish, *The Irish Catholic Experience: A Historical Survey* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985)
Tony Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland, 1366–1922: A Source Book* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000)
Seán de Fréine, *The Great Silence: The Study of a Relationship between Language and Nationality* (Dublin and Cork: Mercier Press, 1978)
Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990)
Adrian Kelly, *Compulsory Irish: Language and Education in Ireland, 1870s–1970s* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002)
Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996)
Remembrance and Imagination (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996)
Eoghan Ó hAnluain (ed.), *Léachtaí Uí Chadhain* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1989)
Brian Ó Cuív (ed.), *A View of the Irish Language* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1969)
Risteárd Ó Glaisne, *De Bhunadh Protastúnach* (Dublin: Carbad, 2000)
Helen Ó Murchú and Máirtín Ó Murchú, *Irish: Facing the Future* (Dublin: Irish Committee of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, 1999)
Seán Ó Tuama (ed.), *The Gaelic League Idea* (Dublin and Cork: Mercier Press, 1972)

TOM INGLIS

4

Religion, identity, state and society

Religion and everyday life

Being Catholic or Protestant has been fundamental to what Irish people have done and said over the past two hundred years. It has been central to family life, education, health care and social welfare and has influenced the schools people attended, the friends they had and who they married. Religion has reached into areas such as the businesses, shops and pubs used by people; as well as the sports played and the newspapers and magazines read. In many ways, Catholics and Protestants in Ireland occupied two different, divided, social worlds. These worlds necessarily overlapped in business and everyday life, of course, but the doctrinal division between Catholicism and Protestantism remained central to commonly held conceptions of national and individual identity.

Religious identity in modern Ireland has been as socially significant as gender, class, ethnicity or sexual orientation. There is nothing uncommon about this. Throughout history and in the contemporary world, religious affiliation has been a major social divider. What made Ireland exceptional throughout the twentieth century was that while the rest of Western Europe became increasing secularised, religious affiliation remained a strong social marker for the Irish. In the terms adopted in this chapter, what mattered was not so much that Irish people were labelled as Catholic or Protestant, but that they were good Catholics and Protestants and could be identified within their communities as having accumulated spiritual capital.

To understand why religious affiliation has remained so important in Ireland, it is necessary to raise issues beyond the particular historical