

Challenges of the Future for Irish and Gaeltacht Identity

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Abstract:

The purpose and goal of the research is to examine the relationship between Irish language and Gaeltacht identity. The article analyses data from the qualitative research which was carried out through the medium of semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussion in the Republic of Ireland. All our findings are based on the evaluations made from the point of view of external, non-Irish researcher. Our findings showed that there is still a substantial relationship between Irish language and Gaeltacht/Gaelic ethnocultural identity. Irish language is an essential element of cultural and national identity and for many people living in Gaeltacht it transcends culture. We assume that language determines our individual/personal identity as well as collective identity. We also highlight some of the most challenging aspects of language revitalization and sustainability of Gaeltacht communities. Identity and language evolve in time so there is a huge space for further research pertaining to the question of language revival and its future which could be examined in the long-term horizon.

Keywords: Irish language, Gaeltacht, identity, culture, Gaeltacht identity / Gaelic ethnocultural identity, language revitalization.

1 Introduction

Many people think that language is primarily about communication, but language does not perform only communicative function. There is much more in it. We can express our identity through the medium of language. Language and culture are intrinsically linked together. It is not wise to teach language without culture and culture without at least some key facts about the language. Thanks to a language we know who we are and where we are heading. We are also aware of our place in a particular society or community thanks to the language we use. There is a human tendency to be a part of something, be it any form of collective or social identity. When using a specific language we also define our borders. We can use one language or more languages as our mother tongue(s). Mother tongues are used subconsciously without too much thinking about grammar and vocabulary.

Language defines our national and cultural identity. Therefore, language is not only a medium of communication. Language helps us confirm our roots and express affiliations towards

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ourselves and other people. It gives us a feeling of belonging or togetherness towards larger group or community. Can we consider language as an important element of cultural and national identity expression and cultural distinctiveness in the context of 21st century?

The performance of identity is more salient when it is expressed through regional, lesser-used or minority language(s). As it was mentioned before, language constitutes our identity. It makes us distinct in such a way that it differentiates the users of one language group from another. This can happen on a daily basis, but it can be more visible during particular cultural, festive or sportive activities. These are the occasions for identity manifestation.

The purpose and goal of our qualitative research is to examine the mutual connection between Irish language and Gaelic ethnocultural identity, the challenges of the future for Gaeltacht communities and Gaeltacht identity. Specifically, we analyse the importance of the Irish language for Gaeltacht communities and Gaeltacht identity. The research on language and identity is very important as it opens new questions and views on language revitalization and can have impact on other minority, lesser-used and regional languages' revitalization. It is written from the perspective of external/non-Irish researchers residing in Slovakia who carried out their research in the Republic of Ireland during their short-term stay within National University of Ireland in the city of Galway.

2 Theoretical framework

There are many authors in Ireland dealing with the topic of Irish language and identity. Recently there have been many books and articles published examining the role of Irish within Irish society (McCubbin, 2010, NicPháidín, Ó Cearnaigh, 2008, O'Malley-Madec, 2008, etc.). There is a multitude of other authors residing in Ireland as well as outside Ireland focusing on the significance of Irish in the context of 21st century. In our research we are focusing on the importance of Irish for Gaeltacht communities which can be described as officially designated Irish-speaking regions.

Many people living in Gaeltachtaí (plural from Gaeltacht) have got emotional bond towards Irish. Even today they feel more comfortable when communicating in Irish, preferring Irish to English as a communication code. Irish language gives these people purpose and meaning in life. Therefore, this paper tries to examine the anatomy of the relationship between Irish language and Gaeltacht identity. Following Brown (2015) the interconnection of people and culture is the main reason why we are here. It is coded in us that we maintain and keep contact with others who belong to the same community which gives us a sense of belonging or togetherness. People living in the real Gaeltacht regions feel this cultural and emotional bond towards other people who speak Irish and regard it as their mother tongue. Gaeltacht/Gaelic ethnocultural identity can be described as a collective identity which is shared by the people who share the same values and cultural/linguistic patterns. These people opine that there is a huge value in Irish.

We assume that Irish language plays an essential role for Gaeltacht communities and can be regarded as an important element fostering cultural identity/Gaelic ethnocultural identity. The abovementioned hypotheses are based on the fact that Irish language is still used actively by many people living in Gaeltacht areas and is considered by many of them as a crucial element determining their identity. It is therefore essential to study the relationship between language and identity in Gaeltacht regions as they are supposed to be the last bastions of the Irish language and their role and existence is viewed as crucial for Irish language revival as well as survival.

Our hypotheses are based on the fact that language is not only about communication. It is more than the sum of grammatical rules which serve us to express ourselves. Each language is a living organism and except for its instrumental function it performs symbolical as well as national-representative function. In the Irish case the Irish language is not a necessary part of constructing ethnicity. The Irish case is very peculiar because the knowledge of Irish does not determine the Irish ethnicity although speaking Irish can play a huge part in individual's life as it is in the case of true Gaeltachtaí (pl. from Gaeltacht, Irish-speaking regions). Despite the fact that the Irish language is not a precondition to Irish ethnicity, we assume that it can continuously support the stability of ethnicity and identity construction. The presence of the Irish language on the island of Ireland is a part of Irish history and enormous language shift towards English is a part of colonial history. The Irish language is underlying element of culture. It is an essential element of cultural heritage. It connects the Irish people with their roots on which their present and future is built. It is more visible in Gaeltacht where Irish is more actively spoken and it is considered a vivid part of individual cultural identity in comparison to the rest of predominantly English-speaking Ireland. We suppose that in Gaeltacht regions the Irish language is more salient and emotional element of identity. In the case of the true Gaeltacht areas the Irish language determines Gaeltacht identity or Gaelic ethnocultural identity.

Nowadays The Republic of Ireland is a multicultural country which is home to a multitude of people coming from different European and non-European countries belonging to different cultures and speaking different languages, simultaneously contributing to country's diversity in the context of 21st century. The traditional essentialistic views that one language represents one nation or ethnic group are far from the truth now. In the present times cultural and national diversity is viewed in a positive way when it adheres to the key values of the 21st century, namely, tolerance and respect. They are the cornerstones of intercultural communication.

Another important fact is that language does not exist on its own, in terms of by itself, but only in terms of socially controlled linguistic practices which are performed by people who speak the particular language on an active basis. By linguistic practices any language can be kept alive so that it can be passed later on to the future generations in terms of intergenerational transmission, which is inevitable for the language vitality. Active use of language supports language life, enhances the process of minority, lesser-used or regional

language revitalization and prevents language death. Daily usage of a particular language makes it more sustainable and healthy in comparison to those languages which are on the verge of extinction nowadays or are dead already.

Language is part of our identity. Cultural and national identities are based on the collective. They can be described as collective/social identities as they are more grounded in a more or less collective knowledge system. Language per se, either one or more, is a part of collective/social identity. It defines who we are not only in terms of nationality, but also in terms of culture. Language can be a bridge connecting its speakers with their culture and identity. There can be many bridges across one river or more languages spoken in one country. As it was mentioned before, identity is not a fixed entity. It evolves in time. People can now possess different identities at the same time. The identities can be performed by using a particular language in a particular situation. There are multilingual individuals whose identity is truly multicultural. Language is part of our roots, representing our predecessors, expressing values, binding us together, constituting unique identity, making us different from others.

When dealing with the topic of language and identity, it is essential to mention that language awareness is stronger in terms of minority, lesser-used or minority languages, at least among those individuals whose identity is primordially expressed by that language. The speakers of healthy or vital languages view their language differently. They take it for granted and maybe they do not ask what the future holds for their mother tongue's existence. On the other hand, endangered languages are very fragile, sensitive to any unpredictable conditions which might arise at any time unexpectedly.

As it was said earlier, language is a testimony of our origin. Irish language is part of Irish history. Today Irish is being revitalized and only the future will show the success of revitalization activities. *20-Year Strategy for the Irish language 2010-2030*, adopted in 2010 for the period of twenty years, presupposes the rise of active users of Irish in Gaeltacht as well as an increase in the number of bilingual individuals across the whole country. The strategy creators view the language as an essential parameter of national and cultural identity of the Irish. The strategy is built on the fact that Irish is a genuine part, testimony and a storehouse of Irish culture and it would be a pity to let it abandoned. There is still a chance to reach a substantial number of active Irish language users and to build the foundations for bilingual society, which is already happening in Ireland through the medium of Irish-language schools (gaelscoilenna), Irish-medium broadcasting (TV TG4, Raidió na Gaeltachta) and Irish-language cultural activities. All these activities are institutionalized and performed through the medium of different Irish-based national as well as local/regional organizations e.g. *Conradh na Gaeilge (Gaelic League)*, *Údarás na Gaeltachta*, *Foras na Gaeilge*, *Gaillimh le Gaeilge*, *National Irish Language Theatre*, *National University of Ireland in the city of Galway*, etc.

3 Method

This paper is based on the short-term qualitative research which was realized in the Republic of Ireland in 2015. We were given the possibility to realize our research within the National University of Ireland in the city of Galway (NUIG) at the Centre for Irish Studies. The city of Galway is very close to Gaeltacht communities. We interacted more closely with different informants coming not only from Galway but also from nearby towns like Moycullen, Barna, Furbo etc. All the data was obtained through the medium of semi-structured individual interviews and focus-group discussions realized with the citizens as well as within particular institutions and organizations residing in the city of Galway and nearby areas aimed at Irish language revitalization. The very purpose of this research was to focus on the Irish language and identity. We used grounded-theory when analyzing the collected data.

The majority of our respondents came from the city of Galway and nearby areas which are situated very close to or are part of the Irish-speaking communities or Gaeltacht areas. A total of 80 respondents took part in the study. Initially, contact was made with the key persons working within and outside academia, just to obtain the most versatile sample of respondents. Afterwards, a snowballing technique was used, whereby our first respondents/informants introduced us with other potential respondents/informants. This enabled us to construct our study. Before we elaborated the study, a detailed coding and analysis had been carried out, according to the principles of grounded-theory. We do not suggest that the opinions of our respondents on Irish language and Gaeltacht identity (Gaelic ethnocultural identity) or their language practices are entirely monolithic. We claim that all informants provided us with a wide range of opinions, that are noteworthy and they offer us a lot of interesting views on such a diverse topic as language and identity is. The sample is otherwise quite heterogenous comprising respondents of different age groups working within but also outside academia.

The collected data was analysed according to the principles of grounded-theory. Each interview was re-written and it underwent a detailed analysis which included creation of codes which were used strategically to point out to the most recurrent topics which were later on placed under deep scrutiny.

4 Results

Why is it essential to revitalize the Irish language? One view is that for the country to feel comfortable there needs to be a sense of cohesion or unanimity in the Irish society about their original language. Irish language is not considered as the language of the rural, inferior or backward people anymore in comparison to the past as it is documented in the opinion of one informant:

Excerpt 181: „Now Irish comes to fashion, people would have before negative opinion on Irish, now opinions reversed. I think now it is important how language is connected to identity, to culture“.

Irish has gained a new status. In 2007 Irish language was declared as one of the official languages of the EU. This opened new horizons for those speaking Irish fluently or those who are currently studying Irish in terms of new job opportunities. This is the way how to make the language more attractive for young learners.

Excerpt 175: „I am from Donegal – Irish speaking area, my mum is from Connemara, my first language is Irish, we learnt English later as kids, we moved to Galway then, now Irish comes to fashion“.

Creation of jobs where Irish language is required contributes to Gaeltacht identity enhancement. The point is that if people feel confident about the stable position of Irish in the Irish society, the language becomes more sustainable. It all requires a degree of trust in revitalization activities or authorities which aims at Irish language revitalization.

It is amazing to see that there are more and more young people in Ireland who feel proud about the Irish language and who would like to bring up their children through the medium of Irish. Such attitudes can trigger intergenerational transmission of Irish and sustain language vitality.

Excerpt 182: „I study Irish because I had a passion about it. If I had kids, I would definitely speak in Irish to them, I would love my kids to be able to speak Irish and English, I would speak both languages to them, for me it is very important“

The key to successful revitalization is also based on economic support of Gaeltacht areas which are economically deprived. Language and culture are mutually connected entities and the support of economy is of paramount importance especially for those regions which are viewed as the bastions of cultural heritage. In the Irish case we refer to the Gaeltacht areas. People in the Gaeltacht regions feel generally disadvantaged. There is a lack of investment in the area. If Irish language is going to survive, real Gaeltacht communities must be supported economically as it was stated by our respondents:

Excerpt 155: „If the Gaeltacht areas were not deprived economically, the Irish language would be in better position.“

Excerpt 156: „The key is that economy and culture go hand in hand, until there is sufficient investment in Gaeltacht regions to young people, it will continue to decline. Irish language speakers should not be disadvantaged.“

Irish language is very important for people living in the true Gaeltacht regions. It is a determinant of their identity and a very vivid part of who they are. Knowledge of Irish language gives people living in the Gaeltacht another dimension in life. It shows them a different perspective how to view the world through the lens of Gaelic ethnoculture. It is said that more languages you know, the more persons you are. Irish language can enrich man's life. „Irish also plays a role in the construction of Gaelic identity” (McCubbin, 2010, p.

466). There are still people in Ireland who feel more comfortable when speaking Irish as the below informant describe:

Excerpt 186: „My language is very important and still there are people in Ireland who do not feel comfortable in speaking English like people from the Islands and we should look after them“.

As it was shown above speaking Irish generates a different feeling. It enriches the life and opens new horizons for its speakers. It is believed that speaking Irish can also symbolize home as an abstract entity. Many of our respondents viewed Gaeltacht as an archetypal element interconnected with cultural identity and soul of the country. Home can be regarded as an essential area to which the human soul belongs. Individual or collective soul often resonates with the soul of the landscape/country (Biarinec et al., 2015). Irish language is interconnected with Gaeltacht regions. Many authors in Ireland have found inspiration in Gaeltacht which has got a very unique character, e.g. Conemara is a place of contrasts, so rugged and breathtakingly beautiful at the same time generating an extraordinary feeling when crossing its different parts. Therefore, the land inside the writer resonates with the land outside and the literary work is a final aesthetic product of original value. Many people decided to stay, move or return to Gaeltacht. To settle in Gaeltacht with the aim to bring up children in Irish is an individual decision which is totally voluntary. As it was said by one of our informants: *Excerpt 88, „Your parents decide about the first language, it is a huge impact“* A couple of our informants decided to return to Gaeltacht and raise their family right there and not anywhere else.

Excerpt 106: „Now we have two kids, their first language is Irish, we have got Irish household“

Excerpt 177: „Until 4th class we did not speak English, only in school, so we were slightly disadvantaged, we never felt comfortable with English, I do not like speaking English language so much“

Learning a language with resentment does not bring any fruits. A key to success is when learning goes hand in hand with joy and humour. Many of our informants studying Irish language or Irish studies stated how teachers' positive mindset and attitudes towards Irish language could trigger students' interest.

Excerpt 172: „Everybody is responsible, I am making my contribution to survival of Irish, you must be positive and not negative if you want to inspire other people, to show people, to make them wanting be like you“

Excerpt 68: „Positivity is a huge thing in doing anything, I work in Irish college in summer. I teach through positivity, it is all about having good time, it has got huge impact, view on life and language, it helps so much more, people need to embrace positivity and to get rid of opinion that Irish language is pointless, that it does not bring anything, it is nice to see the people changing their attitudes.“

The identity in the 21st century is influenced by globalization and incredible movement of people who travel across countries and continents. A new transnational identity has been created. People feel like being at home in different places in the world. There are also hybrid identities on the island of Ireland. Our informants were generally proud of hybridity of which Irish is a substantial part. It is all about looking for the roots and tracing the ancestors and constructing the family tree.

Excerpt 180: „I am coming back to my roots, my children are bicultural and bilingual, both Irish and English and they are happy about it. My Irish identity is hybrid, there are a lot of people born in England with Irish ancestry – called plastic paddies. Irish language is part of my identity“.

Gaeltacht regions are very unique. They are also described as bastions of the Irish language. If the deprivation continues, it will be very difficult to sustain Irish and keep it alive for future generations. This fact worries many of the people living in Gaeltacht regions for whom Irish is a key element of their identity. In the words of our last informant: *Excerpt 112 „The heartland of Irish language is in danger, if it collapses, we will not be able to revive Irish language anymore, that connection will be gone, the strength from geographical community would be lost if that is not supported.“*

5 Discussion

In this section we focus on preconditions to Irish language revitalization. Firstly, Ireland should be reasserted as a country proud of the Irish language. Secondly, it should be made evident that the country believes in Irish language revitalization and considers Irish as part of national cultural values and heritage. In the past Anglicization was on its way to destroying the Irish language. The Irish language was almost forgotten as the language shift towards English was enormous. We suppose that it is not reasonable to be oblivious to cultural roots and to what constitutes our identity, who our ancestors are and how they lived as well as what language(s) they used. As we grow older we become more aware of our roots and culture. We become more patriotic and culturally sensitive.

Luckily, the Irish people did not abandon all the traditions connected with Irish and we can still hear Irish language spoken in many areas and listen to different Irish songs and sean-nós. It is one of the aims of the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* to foster societal bilingualism. Although this aim has not materialized yet fully, there are still a few years left to achieve this goal. The creation of more sustainable and confident Irish-language networks outside Gaeltacht in now predominantly English-speaking areas would be an ideal outcome on the way to foster the future bilingual Irish society. However, a certain degree of geographical/social isolationism and deprivation of Gaeltachtaí militates against the idea of the future creation of happy bilingual society assuming the fact that such a division keeps

communities separate/distant. This is one of the challenges which should be tackled carefully in the Irish society.

There is a multitude of cultural activities realized in the Republic of Ireland aimed at Irish language revitalization. Many of them are carried out every year in the city of Galway and nearby areas, which we visited during our field research. There are many cultural festivals organized in Galway. We participated in the *Fleadh na Gaillimhe* which was a tangible demonstration of identity performed through the medium of Irish all accompanied by Irish dancing and singing showing uniqueness of Irish culture and identity. There are many organizations in the city of Galway which provide Irish language courses, Irish-language cafés and other educational and cultural activities (ConradhnaGaelige, Údarás na Gaeltachta, Gaillimh le Gaelige, NUIG, etc.). Some of them try to link Irish language with business and show how Irish can be used as an important economical asset (Gaillimh le Gaelige). There is a number of kindergartens (naíonraí) where young kids can be taught through the medium of Irish in a very practical way. It is one of the preconditions to language revitalization. Following Brown (2013) collective dancing and singing and using a particular language are essential elements of self-performance and self-expression. Learning language through songs is a very productive teaching method. Through songs we can feel emotional attachment to a community, thus our social identity is fostered. It gives us a sense of togetherness. Words in the song can be used a means to collective or individual cultural identity expression/manifestation. Through the medium of Irish dancing, singing and music the Irish people perform their roots, their culture and themselves. If used from the very early age (e.g. in kindergarten and homes) with joy and fun, the language is capable of remaining a part of child's identity. It is also about how we treat our identity expressed by language. Language used in a particular cultural activity or through the medium of different cultural forms can help sustain and support our authenticity. Learning Irish with joy, humor and smile cannot be underestimated. It is through laughter that we share common experience and values (Brown, 2013).

Speaking particular language can generate a feeling of home. According to Moore (2010) home is mutually connected with a deep feeling based on archetypal experience. The feeling of home can arise in different places and contexts. Language is an intrinsic part of home. Using particular language can generate the vision of home even when being far away from the mother country. For many people living in or outside Gaeltacht the Irish language is important part of this archetypal feeling of home.

Last but not least we would like to focus on what the future holds for Gaeltacht communities and Irish language revitalization. As we have seen from the research results, Gaeltacht communities are not monolithic. They vary according to the real number of Irish language users. Irish identities are complex and heterogenous. In the Republic of Ireland the Irish language is not an exclusive expression of Irish identity. Moreover, there is a general decline of Irish speakers in Gaeltacht regions. Despite this fact, the Irish language is a clear expression of Gaelic ethnocultural identity.

In Ireland the situation with the original (autochthonous) language is very complex and it is important to take into account different identities residing on the island of Ireland and all of them can have a say on matters concerning language and identity or language policy. Language policies in Ireland are treading a very difficult terrain as they must take into account the questions and opinions of different groups or communities living in predominantly English-speaking or Irish-speaking areas. As a result, each language policy should be as sensitive as possible to different language views, which seems to be quite difficult to materialize. If the Irish language is to survive, it must be used by the people in different social domains, not only at home or within specific groups. There is, however, a gap between symbolic and instrumental importance assigned to Irish. If the instrumental importance of Irish is about to rise, then the increase of Irish speakers might follow, which is a good view for any minority language. As it was pointed out, the Irish language is a crucial element of Gaeltacht identity. Gaeltacht areas were demarcated according to the number of Irish language users. Moreover, these areas are unique bastions of peculiar Gaelic ethnocultural identity. Gaeltacht areas are deemed as essential for language revitalization.

Based on our research, it was proved that Irish language is a crucial element for Gaeltacht/Gaelic ethnocultural identity. Keeping Irish language alive in Gaeltacht can save the language for future generations so that language transmission can follow. Gaeltacht communities' survival is therefore viewed as a precondition to Irish language revitalization.

To sum up, it is essential to support Irish-speaking Gaeltacht citizens economically so that they are not forced to leave the region. It is extremely crucial for young people who have got a tendency to leave Gaeltacht areas to other prosperous parts of the country or abroad. It happens often that after their departure, some part of cultural tradition is lost. There are also cases when Irish-speaking men or women return home with their English-speaking spouses. The language continuance is thus severely hampered.

Irish language is a challenge for many people. It can be a barrier for those who want to integrate with the Gaeltacht communities. In terms of social inclusion a significant number of policies will have to be rethought in the future to avoid exclusion. In this view, the government will need an expert help and ideas from the grass-root level too. There must be greater encouragement for Irish speakers to be heard more clearly. Many young people do not think that it is advantageous to speak Irish so this must be tackled too. If the language is going to pass on the future generations, young people should be willing to learn the language and use it in different social domains on a daily basis.

6 Conclusion

All in all, as long as the Irish language is able to/enough vital to perform corresponding social functions, it will not cease to exist. If it happened, the loss of the Irish language would probably not implicate the loss of Irish culture in general, but certain cultural traditions might

be lost with the language death. But only the future will respond to all our questions and assumptions about the Irish language vitality. Nobody can say for sure what will happen in the long-term period. We can just hypothesize and hope that the Irish language will not be lost for future generations assuming the fact that Irish language is part of world's heritage.

It is true that revitalization activities can fade or decay or become defensive. But we need ties that bind us together, a new shared sense of Irishness which is deeply rooted in society. Few would deny that there has been at least a partial progress in Irish language revitalization but possibility of Irish language death continues to lurk about.

The notion of Irish identity goes beyond Irish language now. Although many Gaeltacht people feel connected to Irish, their identities are changing in unpredictable ways. Cultures cannot remain static or settled whatever purists may say/wish. Radical idea of one nation and one language is based on the assumption that there was once a large, homogenous, Irish-speaking majority. These facts are even less defensible in a complex, diverse society of today grappling with globalization, des/integration into Europe, USAdomination, collapsing values, fragmentation, refugee question, migration, etc. More than ever, a national debate about Irish language and Irish collective identity is needed. Following the data analysed from semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussion there is a need to concentrate energy on the ties that bind the Irish people together and use this to create a new Irish identity which is not oblivious to its roots.

We cannot escape diversity, multiculturalism or multilingualism of modern life. Respect and tolerance for using either Irish language or English language or both cannot be allowed to destroy any sense, values and traditions that Irish people appreciate. Irish society is very diverse nowadays and every language spoken in Ireland, be it official or not, frees individuals from the cage of ignorance and opens new horizons and worldviews.

The future of language revitalization is not a one-way act but a process! Unconditional appreciation of culture is based on our own values. Expressing identity through the medium of minority, lesser-used and regional languages is not only about pride but also about fostering courage, compassion and connection. The research on language and identity is never-ending given the fact that language and language attitudes change in time so there is much more space than one would think for further research. The question of Irish language survival or revival is still open as well as the future of Gaeltacht communities. Therefore there is a wide spectrum of new phenomena that could be evaluated and examined in the long-term horizon.

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