

## **The Anglicization of Ireland--A Model for the Linguistic Imperialist?**

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Article 8.1 of the Irish Constitution states "the Irish language as the national language is the first language" (Constitution of Ireland, 1937). Article 8.2 says the English language is recognized as the second official language. The reality is somewhat different. The amount of native Irish speakers has been declining for over the last two centuries, and while this decline has been made up for, somewhat, in recent years by an increase in the amount of second language learners who speak the language proficiently, only an estimated 3%-5% use the language for any meaningful communication.

The Irish language is an integral part of Ireland's education system where it is usually learned as a foreign language and is sometimes taught as a dead language. Irish is rarely used in the public domain, and its use, rather like Swahili in Kenya, is confined to the opening and closing remarks of political speeches (Bogonko, 1992, p. 247). It has some ceremonial value but has little real status.

Although a majority of people in Ireland are supportive of the promotion of Irish, few are actively involved in learning or using it. Almost 80% of Irish people think the first language of Ireland is less useful than a continental language (Hindley, 1990, p. 40). Guise's survey results have found that people view the Irish speaker as smaller, weaker, less educated, less likable, of lower class, lazier and uglier than the English speaker (Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research, 1975). An inconsistent attitude exists towards the language. Real

bilingualism is generally seen as a nice but impractical idea. If actions speak louder than words it seems that most Irish people, unconsciously or otherwise, view the *national language* as being of inferior status to English.

This article will focus on colonial language policy in Ireland. I will examine some international comparisons and will conclude regarding the present position of the language.

Ireland was England's first colony. In 1169-70 an Anglo-Norman force landed in Waterford, heralding the beginning of what would later be referred to by 20th century nationalists as *800 years of oppression*. Linguistically, the Anglo-Normans were a motley crew including Flemish and French speakers as well as Anglo-Saxon among their number. Their conquest, though a speedy one, failed to be comprehensive as in later years most of the Anglo-Norman lords assimilated with the native Irish through intermarriage and adopted Irish customs and language. These lords became somewhat inaccurately known as *more Irish than the Irish themselves*. Such embracing of Gaelicism was viewed from an early stage as being contradictory to the interests of the Anglo-Norman conquest, and the Irish language was singled out by legal attempts to halt the tide of increasing Gaelicism among the lords. A series of measures was passed attacking the Irish language, culminating in the 1366 Statutes of Kilkenny which attempted to legally impose the speaking of English.

These statutes, among other things, warned that every colonist "shall use the English language and be named by an English name...and if any English or Irish living amongst the English use the Irish language... his lands and tenements if he have any be seized into the hands of his immediate lord" (Bliss,

1979, p. 12). The statutes were a crude legislative grasping at straws aimed at protecting the diminishing areas of English influence from an encroaching Gaelicism. They were aimed almost exclusively at the aristocracy. As was to be the case in later English non-settler colonies, little interest at this time was shown in the language of the ordinary person.

The Irish language was not seriously affected by these measures. By the 1500s the vast majority of the country spoke Irish. It was the language of law, religion, and power in all areas outside the Pale, an Anglicized region around Dublin, and a few other, mostly urban areas. For most Irish people it was a language of social status. Within 100 years the position of Irish was to change dramatically.

The harbinger of this change was the imperial ambitions of Ireland's neighbouring island. In the 16th century Tudor England began to lay the foundations of an empire that would eventually include possessions in six continents. The fall of Byzantium in 1453 and the fall of Calais 105 years later meant that an expansionist-minded England had to look westward. Before looking to the Americas she looked immediately west to Ireland.

Due largely to its geographical location Ireland became part of the grand design of plans laid for the future British empire. The country was a potential Achilles' heel for England. An Ireland not under the direct influence of Britain could act as a stepping stone from which any putative Spanish or later French invasion could be launched. From the early 1500s the aim of English colonialism was no longer to administer but to assimilate Ireland. As Sir John Davies said in 1612, "we may conceive and hope that the next generation [of Irish] will in

tongue and heart and everyway else become English so that there will be no difference or distinction but the Irish Sea between us" (An Comhair Poibli, 1970, p. 10).

Mid-16th century Ireland was largely under the control of Gaelic chieftains whose allegiance to Rome and to the Irish language remained an obstacle to Anglicized assimilation. Linguistic uniformity was crucial to the Tudor policy of centralisation in Scotland and Wales as well as Ireland. The Irish language was attacked directly through decree but the most serious attacks came as a by-product of the general strategies used to subjugate Ireland. These were brutal military tactics of scorched earth-engendered famine conditions in the southern part of Ireland. Final military defeat for the Irish chieftains was followed by land confiscation and the planting with English-speaking settlers. By the end of the 1600s Ireland had become the private property of an almost exclusively Protestant and English-speaking landowning class later known as the Ascendancy.

Many aspects of the Irish experience of the 16th and 17th centuries are mirrored in modern day East Timor. Since the 1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor a military campaign inducing famine has been followed by a policy of bringing settlers from Indonesia. While in the linguistic area, Bahasa Indonesia has been introduced as the sole medium of official communication, and Tetum (the most widely spoken language) has been banned throughout the education system (Hull, 1993).

In Ireland, having effectively been appropriated by the new order, land and power became associated with English. The monasteries and the bardic schools, which had been crucial for the maintenance of a Gaelic literary tradition and had promoted

the literary standardization of the language, ceased to exist (O'Dochartaigh, 1992). The monasteries were dissolved by law, and the bards, following the defeat of their erstwhile patrons, the chieftains, had to look to the illiterate common people for patronage. From this period, Irish became associated with illiteracy. When Ireland joined the European trend of late 19th century nationalism and began to consider the idea of language revival, an estimated 50 literate native speakers remained in the country (Edwards, 1995). Later demographers would use illiteracy levels as a reliable guide to the amount of Irish spoken. The language was losing status, that intangible but essential quality necessary for any language to survive.

Unlike Scots-Gaelic and Welsh, the Reformation left Irish literacy levels almost totally unchanged. Although the use of the vernacular was, and is, one of the guiding principles of colonial evangelical Protestantism, the Irish example provides us with an interesting exception. Those who viewed spiritual salvation as being of crucial importance supported the promotion of literacy in the vernacular to facilitate access to the scriptures. Trinity College Dublin, founded in 1592 to promote Protestantism, made some money available in special grants to Irish-speaking students although neither books nor a lectureship were provided (Durkacz, 1983).

Attempts to spread vernacular literacy were likened by one 19th century Irish evangelist to preparing "the field...to receive the seed" (Durkacz, 1983, p. 121). As is often the case with modern evangelicals, the seed was usually encumbered with ideological baggage. In 17th century Ireland, Protestantism was inseparable from fidelity to the crown. The prize of conversion

was not merely salvation but also the creation of a loyal subject. For many, this was a sufficiently rewarding end to justify the means of using the *barbarous* tongue as the medium of proselytism. Thus, despite the stated official opposition to the Irish language, some books such as the Bible and a catechism were printed in Irish (Durkacz, 1983, p. 30).

Unlike the contemporaneous examples of Wales and Scotland and the later examples of 19th century Africa, the Church of Ireland made no *sustained attempt* to use Irish. Hostility to Irish was such that even its use for proselytizing was restricted. Dr. Henry Jones complained in the 1600s when approaching the Irish Protestant parliament for financial assistance in reprinting the Bible in Irish that it was "almost a principle of their politics to suppress the language utterly rather than in so public a way to countenance it" (Durkacz, 1983, p. 31).

In any case most Irish Catholics were unwilling to change their spiritual allegiance and so the administration's policy was to exclude the Catholics as much as possible from any positions of power. This had a devastating effect for Irish in the long term because it ensured the consolidation of its decline in status, but it did ensure its preservation in the short term as Catholics were confined to a social and economic ghetto and were given little incentive to change their language.

This was to change from the late 1700s as the laws excluding Catholics from societal positions of power began to be relaxed. Political opportunities were made available to rich Catholics who were given the vote in 1792 and were able to enter parliament in 1829.

In other areas economic gain could be attained for those who could speak English. Northern Ireland was industrializing and many Catholics in search of work were drawn towards the traditionally Anglicized cities and towns. For the first time in 200 years benefits were available to Catholics who cooperated with colonialism. This rehabilitation was marked by the state funding of a Catholic seminary at Maynooth in 1795 and, more importantly, in 1831 when the Catholic church was co-opted by British imperialism to run the fledgling national school system. Naturally both of these educational institutions operated through English. By 1845 half the bishops and half the clergy had been educated in Maynooth with consequent repercussions for their political and linguistic outlook (McDowell, 1994).

A different education policy was pursued in Ireland than that which pertained to most of the other colonies. For example, schools in India allowed a modicum of nationalism in the curriculum because education there was directed at an elite. In Ireland, where the access to basic education was more general, the textbooks were totally devoid of nationalist sentiment (Kiberd, 1995). Secondly, English was the sole medium of instruction unlike in Malaysia where there was a fear that "affording an English education to any large number of Malays would be the creation of a discontented class who might become a source of anxiety to the community" (Pennycook, 1994, p.73). The Irish example bears out Pennycook's assertion that it could be as much to the benefit of colonialism to impose as to withhold the colonial language. Irish was banned in primary schools until 1879 and even then it could only be taught after school hours (McGuire, 1990). Of course the use of English as the

medium of primary school teaching to monoglot Irish speakers had predictable results especially in the areas to the west of Ireland where Irish remained more entrenched. Douglas Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League language revival movement, wondered "if there was any other country in the world where schoolteachers taught children who could not understand them" (Kiberd, 1995, p. 144).

A famous Irish writer Tomas O'Criomthain recorded his first day in a newly established primary school in 1864. It was apparently the first day that he had heard the English language and "Bhain an focal seo leathadh as mo shuille mar ni fheadar cad e an sort bri a bhi leis. This word opened my eyes with wonder as I hadn't a clue what it meant" (Nic Craith, 1995, p. 21).

Parents were a powerful force to ensure instruction was through English. Singapore provides a modern example of parents who, when allowed an element of choice in the education of their children, opt for the language that is most likely to benefit their children materially. And just as secondary schooling in Malay and Tamil was rejected by parents in Singapore in this century, Irish was rejected in the last (Watson, 1992). The language had lost its status at that stage and though possibly still spoken by the majority of the people there was a tendency for children to be forced to use English by their parents.

The reason for the parents' insistence, which was irrelevant in any case as the state also insisted on English only, was obvious. The 19th century world of the Irish peasant was opening up. The promise of available land and opportunity in North America attracted many Irish emigrants from often densely populated countryside. The tragedy of the great potato



famine, itself a product of British misrule, and the death of 12-15% of the population made emigration a practical necessity. In the years 1847-55, a further 15% of the population took the emigrant ship in an estimated halving of the number of Irish speakers. The vast majority went to England or to its *linguistic child* the United States. The Irish peasantry was making its first steps into the wider world and found that *Irish will butter no bread*, a saying still echoed by older Irish speakers (Hindley, 1990, p. 178). The Irish person looking out to the wider world in the 1800s saw an English-speaking world. If the language didn't butter bread in Ireland then it certainly wouldn't do so in the thoroughly Anglicized emigrant destinations. The famine gave another seemingly undeniable reason to abandon the language. Often viewed as a curse, it became further associated with poverty and backwardness.

Although Ireland was famously referred to by former president Eamon de Valera as an *outgarden* for England, the aim of imperial policy was not merely to extract materially from the colony. Ireland, unlike India or African colonies, was to be assimilated politically and not merely administered and exploited. Linguistic Anglicisation of Ireland's inhabitants, especially in the 19th century, had certain benefits for the colonizer. It ensured a cheap, English-speaking and mobile workforce for industrial England. Thus, emigrants working in the mills and ports of England helped the economic powerhouse of the empire while the imperial strongarm was aided by the disproportionately large amount of Irish in the British army.

In 19th century Ireland, English was necessary for trade, business and all state jobs. The towns were thoroughly

anglicized and the emigrant boat, the most likely option for approximately half of the people born in Ireland, was bound for an English-speaking destination. The major institutions of the community, the Catholic Church, the education system, and the governmental institutions centered in the capital city, Dublin, all used English. For those who stayed at home, innovations such as the train system made the remoter Irish-speaking areas more accessible to the wider world. Anglicisation went hand-in-hand with modernization.

As Ireland was heading towards bilingualism the Irish-speaking population theoretically had three options. They could maintain bilingualism, revert to Irish, or shift to English monoglottism. In reality there was no choice. There are no examples of the maintenance of bilingualism for any extended period once the middle classes have abandoned the native tongue. Also a minority couldn't have maintained bilingualism even to the extent of the shrinking Swedish community in Finland because the Irish had not a linguistic patron in the way that Swedish Finns have (Allardt, 1986).

At end of the 1800s the Irish language was in serious decline. By the 1890s only 15% spoke the language bilingually and 5% were monoglot. Despite some success on behalf of the Gaelic League, a body of language enthusiasts, it was in this strongly anti-Irish environment that Southern Ireland gained self rule and the Irish Free State was proclaimed in 1922. The attitude of the government since independence has been profoundly schizophrenic. On one hand, the language has been constitutionally exalted as the first and national language, but on the other, the day-to-day realities have remained not greatly

changed from the colonial era. The burden of the language revival was placed on the schools and on the shoulders of the remaining Irish-speaking areas which were given special status. Irish was to become a compulsory subject in first and second level education; presumably, this was based on the idea that English had gained dominance through its compulsion in previous times. Reliance on compulsory learning signaled that the teachers and school children of Ireland were to be entrusted with the responsibility of re-Gaelicising Ireland while the business of state and civil affairs was conducted in English.

The language policy of the new state has been marked by a lack of confidence. There is virtually no debate regarding the use of English as there is in India or some African countries. Both government and people know that English does butter bread and there is no likelihood of a move to follow Memmi's advice to "go all the way with the revolt" (Memmi, 1957, p. 137), relinquish the language and rip up the linguistic equivalent of the colonial train tracks. According to the report of one semi-state body, "the overriding constitutional rights of Irish speakers were not asserted" (Bord na Gaeilge, 1986, p. 47). They remain loftily enshrined in the constitution but are ignored almost everywhere else.

For the Irish reader, balanced bilingualism is an impossibility. Ninety-nine per cent of commercial publishing is in English and books on most subjects are simply unavailable in Irish (Hindley, 1990). While subsidies are available to writers using Irish, no equivalent of the Welsh Books Scheme, which guarantees a market for writers using the native language, has

ever existed. Inevitably, any reader will be more literate in English than Irish.

In Northern Ireland, where the administration has had a traditionally hostile attitude to the language, a mini revival is taking place. This is partly due to the general reasons for language revival and partly because the language is a badge of resistance to anti-imperialists in Northern Ireland (Whelan, 1991, p. 4). The situation is sufficiently encouraging for one language activist to claim "there will never be the need to write the last chapter in the history of the Irish language" (O'Breaslain & O'Dwyer, 1995).

But survival of Irish remains doubtful. The Gaeltacht areas have declined to the extent that one writer estimates around 10,000 native Irish speakers live in areas where the language is sufficiently strong to ensure its transmission to the next generation (Hindley, 1990). It is probable that within two generations, though the language will still be learned by schoolchildren, Irish will have died as a living language. There will be no revival of Irish comparing to the resurrection of Hebrew because the necessity, the political will, nor the public will exist.

So English has arisen to a position of unquestionable dominance and a real effort at bilingualism is not seriously countenanced, yet is it a model for the linguistic imperialist? If it is a model it is an outdated one. Imperialism has moved on and with some exceptions, notably East Timor and Turkish Kurdistan, languages are no longer being extinguished at the point of a gun. But judged in the context of their time, certainly the strategies of English linguistic imperialism were

successful. The demeaning of the status of Irish was achieved as a byproduct of general imperial strategies of warfare, famine, legislation and social exclusion. All of these strategies were successful to a greater or lesser degree.

However, English was imposed for a greater reason. It was meant to breed political loyalty. As Spenser said "the speech being Irish, the heart must needs be Irish" (O'Breaslain & O'Dwyer, 1995, p. 12). Conversely, the basis of introducing English was that the political heart would also become English. Or, as articulated by the Portuguese imperialist Marques de Pombal when "there is introduced the language of that prince there is rooted in them Devotion Veneration and Obedience" (Beozzo, 1996, p. 83). This didn't happen. Although colonial language policy succeeded in breeding what Memmi calls a *rejection of self*, at least regarding the language, it did not succeed in breeding general colonial devotion, veneration and obedience, the lack of which is easily observable from a glance at the Irish historical record. And so to the title of the paper, the Anglicisation of Ireland: a Model for the Linguistic Imperialist? It was a model in purely linguistic terms: the language is dying, but in political terms a general loyalty was not instilled through imposition of the language. The answer then must be *yes* and *no* or as we say in Hiberno-English: 'twas and 'twasn't.

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