

*Is fearr Gaeilge bhriste ná Bearla cliste:** Irish Language Revival in West Belfast, Northern Ireland

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Introduction: Minority and Threatened Languages

Although there is little public awareness of the issue of language endangerment, recent centuries have seen a dramatic rise in the phenomenon of language death and endangerment.* Rather than evolving into new languages in the way that Latin became the Romance languages, many tongues are simply disappearing entirely; of the approximately 6,000 languages currently spoken, it is estimated that between fifty to ninety percent of them will become extinct before the close of the next century. In fact, only about 600 languages have a speaker population of greater than 100,000. Although speaker population alone does not guarantee stability, small languages simply disappear more quickly than large languages suffering under external pressures (Nettle & Romaine, 2000: 8-9). "...Powerful groups do not usually become bilingual. It is the powerless who are forced to learn and then use the dominant language..." (Ó Donnai, 1997: 206); consequently, motivation to continue speaking and using a minority language is largely driven by economic pressures to assimilate into a dominant culture, and small populations are often unable to generate a significant market for media in their language (Grenoble & Whaley, 1998). They likewise encounter difficulty in obtaining real political power because of their small size, notably in the education system (Mithun,

* Broken Irish is better than clever English.

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1998: 182-3). This means that as language populations become increasingly smaller they face heightened pressure to shift to a dominant language. Attachment to ancestral tongues simply cannot surmount the enormous socioeconomic pressures against continuing to speak a low-prestige language associated with poverty and a lack of progress (Dorian, 1998). Hence, although language shift is often presented as the result of a free choice on the part of the speakers, political and economic circumstances have created a situation in which it is only through extraordinary willpower - and often considerable personal sacrifice - that such communities can maintain their languages (Hale, 1998: 213-5; Nettle & Romaine, 2000: 152-66, 187-8).

Most of these small, threatened languages are spoken by the indigenous populations of Asia, Australia, Africa, and the Americas, who use sixty percent of the world's languages despite comprising only four percent of the population. In addition to providing important scientific data about the structural possibilities and origins of human language, threatened languages have enormous cultural import and symbolic significance for the people who speak them (Nettle & Romaine, 2000: 10-23). The loss of a minority language, because it typically corresponds to the loss of a traditional way of life, often entails the loss of speakers' intellectual and literary traditions (Hale, 1998: 204-212), in particular knowledge about the local environment and classification systems (Nettle & Romaine, 2000: 62-77, 166-72). Additionally, while the death of a language may not necessitate the death of its corresponding culture or worldview, it means the death of a significant part of a culture; although claims that cultural knowledge and values can only be transmitted or expressed in a specific language cannot be accepted cate-

gorically, certain aspects of traditional cultures are so intimately bound up with language that they are in fact lost in translation (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1998: 73-6). Popular definitions of ethnicity require that a group speak a distinct language (O'Reilly, 2002: 183). Although this conflation of language and identity traces its development to nineteenth century nationalism rather than actual sociolinguistic reality, the "equation of one language/one people, the Western insistence on the authenticity and moral significance of the mother tongue..." continues to influence most efforts to reverse language shift (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994: 61). The prevalence of this conceptualization of nationality means that in addition to the cultural deficit incurred by language loss, the absence of a distinct speech variety could potentially increase the future difficulty of speakers' receiving official recognition as a minority group entitled to the rights set out by international organizations and agreements. Language death, then, has profound scientific, cultural, and political implications.

The Irish Situation

Works on language shift and revival frequently cite Irish as an example of a failed language revival movement, noting its dubious distinction of being probably the only such 'minority' language to have continued to decline despite several decades of concerted revival efforts by the government of the Republic (e.g. Nettle & Romaine, 2000: 39). Many of the state's founders were actively involved in the turn of the century Gaelic Revival, and early legislation enshrined the language in the Constitution and the educational system, requiring relative proficiency for graduation and certain government positions. Active government support of this nature has failed to revitalize the

language, at best slowing the shift towards extinction and maintaining it as a learned second language rather than a native language. While activists have at times complained that government support is in reality more symbolic than practical (i.e. the lack of practical resources made available to native speakers in the traditional Gaeltacht or Irish-speaking area), the fact remains that attaining an official governmental and educational role for the language was not sufficient to reverse the shift to English; given that advocates for threatened and minority languages across the world continue to agitate for these same advantages, it is important to note that the measures sought are not enough in themselves to save a language.

The Irish revival has seen a surge of activism over the course of the past few decades, with interest in the language rising and increasing numbers of people attempting to learn to speak it. This heightened interest is likely linked to the rise of the 'Celtic Tiger' and the recent vogue-ishness of many aspects of Celtic culture, notably the popularity of Celtic music and attempts to incorporate pre-Christian druidic beliefs into New-Age spiritual practices. Be that as it may, the major thrust of the current revival has in fact come from a very different, and in many respects very surprising, source: Northern Ireland. Ironically, the most successful of recent revival efforts have been implemented in what has been until very recently an overtly hostile political climate, while government-supported efforts in the South have proved largely ineffective; although the vast majority of the populace identify the language as a vital component of Irish identity and express support for its expanded usage in national language attitudes surveys, this enthusiasm in no way extends to actually exerting themselves to gain fluency and incorpo-

rate the language into their day to day lives (O'Reilly, 1999). Such efforts, however, have characterized the Northern Irish revival movement over the past few decades, where activists have achieved Conradh na Gaeilge's¹ seemingly unattainable goal and created a new Gaeltacht (the Shaw's Road Community in west Belfast) outside of the remote areas where the language has historically thrived, despite lacking official status and recognition and facing staunch opposition from the government. If the fate of the language in the southern state has been particularly noteworthy for its lack of achievement despite the presence of the official sanction other activists hope will help their languages, then the progress made in the Six Counties² is even more remarkable by contrast. Why would a language wither in a supportive situation but thrive in the midst of hostility?

Northern activists' ability to turn an unfavorable political situation to their advantage in promoting the language provides a great deal of insight into the motivation behind minority language maintenance and revival, and how this can shape public policy. In particular, the creation of the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht and the establishment and growth of Irish-medium education have had an enormous impact in terms of increasing Irish usage throughout West Belfast, eventually culminating in a more hospitable political climate. The advent of these more favorable policies, coupled with the expansion of

¹ Prominent activist Douglas Hyde founded Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League) in 1893 to preserve and promote the Irish language, hoping to change a largely intellectual movement into a popular one. The organization continues to be among the most active and important of groups involved with the Irish language.

² The island of Ireland is divided into thirty-two counties. Northern Ireland consists of six of these counties (Armagh, Derry, Down, Tyrone, Antrim, and Fermanagh), and hence is sometimes referred to as the Six Counties.

the language throughout the community, has raised issues of how best to maintain those gains that have been made, ensure that the movement's momentum is sustained, and, crucially, how to continue to encourage the interest in the language vital for such a small and vulnerable speech community without losing any of the language's complexity or idiosyncrasies to the simplifications and overgeneralizations of a large L2 learner population. Some degree of accommodation of the mistakes of 'learner Irish' is necessary if the revival movement is to continue to make progress towards creating a bilingual northern society, but the current state of development of Belfast Irish raises questions of how much change a threatened language can accommodate – and how quickly it can do so – without losing its linguistic integrity. Maguire (1991) in particular has noted that some of the simplifications made by L2 learners parallel the changes that occur as languages and dialects become moribund, and that the movement's current focus on applauding all efforts to use Irish could ultimately lead to a high enough influx of non-standard constructions (many of them transferred from English) that it will no longer be Irish that northerners are actually speaking. However, despite the continued challenges that the revival movement faces, Irish's prospects for survival in the North are increasingly bright.

History of Decline

Given this precarious position, and in particular worries about the potential influence of English on even the new generation of native speakers, it is easy to overlook the fact that the language had shown remarkable resilience against the pressures of English for centuries, with early Norman conquerors so thoroughly assimilating that they

are commonly referred to as 'more Irish than the Irish themselves.' In fact, Irish had been steadily expanding across Europe as a scholarly and literary language for several centuries prior to the eleventh-century Anglo-Norman invasion (Nettle & Romaine, 2000: 133). Even after this conquest, exasperated English commentators noted that even much of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy remained monolingual Gaelic speaking well into the sixteenth century, such that as late as 1541 the bill to declare Henry VIII King of Ireland had to be read in Irish because only one of the lords attending the English Parliament in Dublin spoke any English. It was only with the Tudor policy requiring young aristocrats to be educated, and hence acculturated, in England that a diglossic situation was established whereby English became the language of those in power, and hence of vital importance for social mobility and success; once this shift towards associating Irish with the rural poverty of the peasantry had occurred, the abandonment of Irish for English became almost inevitable as people attempted to better their lives (Maguire, 1991: 21-2, 37). Even so, Irish retained its dominance among the majority of the population well into the seventeenth century, and only began rapidly losing ground after the potato blight of the 1860s. Mass starvation and emigration decimated Ireland's population, and the wild, rural western coastal region, a bastion of traditional culture home to many of the country's remaining monolingual Irish speakers, was one of the most devastated areas of the country. Not only did the Famine decimate the Irish-speaking population, but the Gaeltacht settled into an emigration culture in which knowledge of English was essential for those leaving the country, further undermining the language's increasingly tenuous position. By the time of the Gaelic Revival at the turn of the century, the situa-

tion was desperate enough that eventual extinction seemed unavoidable; however, with the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921 the language found itself the beneficiary of a new government filled with supporters of Conradh na Gaeilge's language revival efforts, notably President Eamon DeValera, intent upon enacting protective legislation.

Irish in the North: Historical Position and Early Revival

The ever-volatile political situation became increasingly explosive during the early twentieth century, including the 1916 Easter Rising and the Irish Civil War. Irish leader Michael Collins drew on the resentment of a populace embittered by the fate of the leaders of the 1916 rebellion to earn popular support, and the success of his guerrilla tactics placed enormous pressure on the British government; ultimately, this culminated in a negotiation with the government granting independence to twenty-six of the Irish counties, with the Protestant-majority northern counties remaining part of the British empire. While the resulting Free State fully supported Irish, partition placed the language in an entirely different situation in the six northern counties, where the Stormont government's Unionist³ leadership was openly hostile to any efforts to promote the language. Threatened by the growth of Catholic political power in the south, northern Protestants increasingly embraced a British identity, particularly after prominent activist and Conradh na Gaeilge founder Douglas Hyde's failure to prevent the increasingly strong association between Irish language and culture with nationalism and calls for Home Rule (Mac Póilin, 1997). Having thus alienated moderate unionists interested in

³ Unionism refers to the political position of those who favor continued union with Britain, in contrast to republican demands for Irish independence.

the language, Irish nationalists were faced with a reactionary government of more radical unionists actively enforcing discrimination against Catholics (by that time, essentially synonymous with nationalist/republican); Catholic/nationalist reluctance to recognize the fledgling northern state because of its disenfranchising policies further called their loyalty into question, making nationalist culture seem especially dangerous as a potential way of undermining the British character unionists hoped the state would retain. Because of its republican ties, the unionist majority viewed Irish not only with suspicion but as an alien threat (Andrews, 1997). Ironically, not only had pre-plantation⁴ Ulster been the most gaelicized of the four historic provinces⁵ of Ireland, but before partition the Protestant community had itself been divided into those belonging to the Church of Ireland and the Presbyterian descendants of Scottish settlers. The Presbyterian community had also been disenfranchised by the British government, albeit less so than had Catholics, and as ethnic Scottish Gaels shared many cultural aspects with the native Irish, particularly given the long history of cross-migration between Ulster and Scotland. Just as unionists ignored the tradition of revivalism within the Protestant community

⁴ As the original Anglo-Norman 'conquerors' became gaelicized, the effort to anglicize Ireland turned to the importation of loyal English subjects; each of the successive attempted colonies, however, was unsuccessful until the Ulster plantation of the 17th century. The ascension of James VI and I united English and Scottish interests in the exploitation of Irish resources, and while Ireland had been an unattractive agricultural prospect for potential English settlers, Scottish colonists found the prospect agreeable. These Scottish settlers provided the sheer numbers necessary for a successful plantation (Hindley, 1990: 5).

⁵ Ancient Ireland was divided into four provinces: Connaught in the west (modern counties Galway, Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim, & Roscommon), Munster in the south (Cos. Kerry, Cork, Waterford, Tipperary, Limerick, & Clare), Leinster in the east (Cos. Louth, Meath, Dublin, Wicklow, Wexford, Carlow, Kilkenny, Laois, Offaly, Westmeath, Longford, & Kildare) and Ulster in the north (Cos. Donegal, Derry, Antrim, Down, Armagh, Monaghan, Cavan, Fermanagh, & Tyrone). Although 'Ulster' is now often used to denote Northern Ireland, not all of the historic province is part of the Northern state.

when decrying the 'nationalist' and 'Catholic' Irish language, loyalist working class Protestants ignored the Gaelic aspects of their heritage as they sought to create a new identity based around a vehemently anti-Irish Orangeism (McKee, 1997). The rapid growth of sectarianism and distrust rendered impracticable the possibility that the Presbyterian and Catholic communities, sharing both a number of common Celtic/Gaelic cultural features and a history of disenfranchisement by the British government, might work together peaceably within the newly created northern state.

From its establishment in 1921 the Stormont government's prioritization of unionist values correlated with an overt hostility to the language, an attitude made immediately clear by the removal of the question about proficiency in Irish from the 1921 Census, underlining the new administration's initial refusal to even acknowledge the existence of Irish speakers within its boundaries, let alone address their rights or needs; unsurprisingly, minor northern Gaeltachtaí in Tyrone, Sperrins, Antrim Glens, and Rathlin Island had all disappeared by the 1940s (Goldenberg, 2002: 19-21). Stormont's hostility extended to virtually all expressions of Irish identity, including Gaelic games, ceilidh dancing, and Irish music, arts, and drama, heightening Nationalist alienation while ensuring that cultural activities became dependent upon nationalist political sponsorship and the Catholic Church (McKee, 1997: 32). This government antagonism was most readily apparent – and most ferociously fought against – in the area of education. The possibility of Irish medium education was essentially nonexistent, and even as a taught subject the language was unwelcome in state schools, with the government increasingly restricting its teaching as time went on. The Minister of Education's attitude

towards the teaching of such a 'useless' and 'subversive' language, in addition to alienating Catholics, is often cited as the cause of the rapid deterioration of the relationship between the education ministries in the Republic and the North (Andrews, 1997: 60). Policy developed in 1923 limited any teaching of the language to a maximum of one and a half hours a week and only to children of the third grade or higher, with the incorporation of Irish into the curriculum being made possible by eliminating history; additional Irish education could only occur outside school hours (Maguire, 1991: 42). Comhaltas Uladh, founded as an autonomous advocacy group affiliated with Conradh na Gaeilge in the South, immediately began lobbying the Ministry for a more liberal attitude towards the language, requesting a half hour a day of instruction by competent teachers and the inclusion of Irish and Ireland-themed texts; by the time negotiations were initiated to end a nationalist boycott it was clear that the Ministry's ultimate goal was to completely eradicate the language from the curriculum and prevent the training of qualified Irish teachers by denying funding to Irish-language colleges. Although officials became alarmed by the longevity of the campaign, in the end the only concession activists were able to wrest from the Ministry was a restoration of the original 1923 policy allowing Irish to be taught in place of history beginning in the third grade, reversing a decision to raise the age limit to the fifth grade. Despite this official denial and dismissal of bilingualism, unionist politicians reacted furiously to the continued allowance of *any* Irish in the educational system (Andrews, 1997: 61-5).

Demands that the government abolish even the limited presence the language was allowed as a foreign, and dead, language placed enormous pressure on a govern-

ment faced with the problem of the huge popularity of Irish among the nationalist population. Despite all of the impediments to learning it, Irish remained the second most popular language taught after French and its symbolic importance for nationalists as a key component of Irish identity meant that acceding to further unionist demands for abolishment could cause the already volatile political situation to explode. Additionally, while most officials were as alarmed by the nationalist overtones of Irish usage as the unionist politicians calling for abolishment, they felt that this very quality made an outright ban impracticable. In private communication with unionist leaders, educational authorities not only insisted that the Ministry was doing everything within its power to eliminate the language in the Six Counties, they constantly reiterated their belief that a policy of repression rather than actual illegality was the most effective means of eradicating the language because, as Charlemont put it, outlawing the language would "...stimulate it to such an extent that the very dogs in Belfast...will bark in Irish" (Andrews, 1997: 74-81).

The Jaitacht and Language Symbolism

Given the example of the South, where the revival movement lost much of its impetus once the creation of the Free State and the consequent end of cultural suppression meant that the average person no longer felt compelled to learn Irish as a badge of their cultural identity, this policy is remarkably astute. Much of the appeal the language holds for northern nationalists results from its implied rejection of the state; speaking even the *cupla focal*, or 'few words,' allows people who perceive themselves as largely politically powerless to protest against the government. The emergence of the 'Jaitacht'

in the late 1970s and early 1980s following the revocation of special category status of political prisoners (at that time, often interred without being tried or even charged) provides a vivid example of this. Those incarcerated in Long Kesh during the blanket and dirty protests and the hunger strikes⁶ explicitly stated that their motivation for learning the language—which a number of them had not enjoyed or even hated as students—was as a form of political protest. Irish became

...not just a living language spoken, indeed shouted from behind permanently closed cell doors. It performed a special role. It allowed prisoners to convey secretly their plans...It reinforced in the prisoners' minds their nationalist identity, their sense of separateness...it fortified them psychologically against the oppression of English speaking warders...(prisoner Jim Gibney, quoted in Goldenberg, 2002: 74-5).

Banned from use, Irish rapidly gained appeal, with prisoners defying regulations to shout Irish lessons to each other and using it to convey even the most banal of sentiments to antagonize prison authorities alarmed by the threat posed to their sense of control when they found themselves suddenly ignorant of what was being said around them. Speaking Irish was transformed into not only an assertion of identity but of rebellion and, crucially, a way of exerting power over one's captors⁷. Decades after the last

⁶ The revocation of special category status led to a series of protests by republican inmates during the 1970s and early 1980s. The first of these was the blanket protests, when prisoners refused to wear prison-issue clothing (their earlier political status had allowed them to keep their own clothes, books, etc) and hence were clad only in blankets. This escalated into the 'no-wash' dirty phase, during which prisoners smeared the walls of their cells with their own feces. The protests culminated in the hunger strikes of the early 1980s, during which ten men starved to death, the most prominent of whom was Irish speaker Bobby Sands.

⁷ Interestingly, many radical unionist prisoners also learned basic conversational phrases, and some actually became quite proficient through lessons shouted across the prison to them by republican inmates. While a number of the most proficient unionist speakers' attraction to the language was based on seeing past political differences towards a common cultural heritage shared with republicans, the awe that many loyalist prisoners expressed for the H-block protests and language activities undoubtedly inspired much of the interest (Goldenberg, 2002: 78-9). This

monoglot Irish speakers began actively encouraging their children to learn English so that they wouldn't be powerless in dealings with the English-speaking authorities, a group of prisoners raised the possibility that the authorities would have to begin to learn Irish as a precaution in dealings with radical republicans. The functional importance of the language had risen dramatically over the course of a few years. Then, however, recognizing the impotence of the prohibition of Irish in the prison system, the authorities began gradually relaxing the ban during the 1980s and allowed access to educational material. Although exams showed that prisoners had achieved a very high level of proficiency and the tradition of prison learning continued, actual everyday usage of the language decreased and new, monolingual English-speaking arrivals did not achieve the high degree of proficiency attained by earlier prisoners (Goldenberg, 2002: 77).

This surge in interest, use, and importance while Irish was banned and the subsequent decline of the language in a non-academic, conversational context once the ban was lifted demonstrates just how insightful the Stormont administration's determination that a policy of political hostility and educational neglect would most efficiently lead to a decay of Irish usage actually was. The degree to which the revival movement appears to hinge on the perception of Irish as a vital aspect of cultural (and in many cases political) resistance helps explain the failure of state support in the South to maintain the

peaceful interaction between two such violently antagonistic groups is particularly interesting in relation to the Ministry of Education's belief about the disadvantages of abolishing Irish outright; if loyalists for whom Irish culture was traditionally anathema began speaking Irish after it gained symbolic status while banned within the prisons, the authorities' belief that nationalists would rally around the language as a means of opposing cultural suppression seems particularly well-founded.

momentum of the Gaelic Revival and also the otherwise surprising anomaly of an urban Gaeltacht in the North. As a symbol of Irish identity and culture, the Irish language has become one of the most easily identifiable elements of the Northern Ireland conflict. For nationalists in particular, the language became a way of asserting an Irish identity in an ostensibly non-political way when they were denied the opportunity to express their political identity within the government. The hunger strikes of the early 1980s had the direct impact of strengthening people's association between Irish and republicanism, as well as of inspiring increased language learning.⁸ Largely because of the importance nationalists attached to Irish, unionists perceived it as a symbol of resistance to their authority and rejection of the British state, and felt threatened by this linguistic alliance with what for them was an alien Southern political and cultural identity⁹ (Goldenberg, 2002: 40-7). Irish had become so threatening for unionists that even people

...who would regard themselves as tolerant will defend the right of people to speak Irish, but are insulted if the language is spoken in front of them...it is normal and acceptable to speak English in [Northern] Ireland but it can be bad-mannered, insensitive or even sometimes politically subversive to speak Irish or use the language publicly (Ó Donnaile, 1997: 206).

Linguistic choices became so fraught with political meaning that even simple names carried symbolic importance. Thus, when residents of the Victoria Barracks Flats requested

⁸ The hunger strikes also marked the beginning of republican use of murals. Belfast's notorious political murals had previously been an exclusively unionist tradition. Because the murals often incorporate Irish-language slogans alongside English ones, they further cemented the association between the language and radical republicanism (Goldenberg, 2002: 55-7).

⁹ Of the sizable minority of Protestants interested in Irish today, many continue to assert that the nationalistic associations of the language proves an insurmountable barrier (Mac Póilin, 1997: 44). For those who do begin to learn, there is often more within-community pressure against speaking Irish, including threats, because of the language's symbolic import (Malcolm, 1997: 18-9).

that their apartments' names be changed (they were named primarily for British military heroes), the housing authorities tried to revoke their initial consent to a name change by claiming that their computer system would be unable to recognize the proposed Irish names—despite the fact that the names, which were taken from mythology, remain quite common among the general populace and by extension, their employees (Goldenberg, 2002: 52-3).

The controversies surrounding signs, names, and other highly visible examples of Irish use further highlight the language's symbolic import. Street signs, for example, are a highly popular way of promoting minority languages because although not terribly effective in terms of increasing usage, they are relatively easy to create. Unionists nonetheless found Irish signage so threatening that they enacted legislation to ban it in 1949; activists generally ignored the ban and repeatedly posted illegal street signs. The ban was not overturned until 1995, and even then the Belfast City Council made the erection of Irish signs extremely difficult. Similarly, the Fair Employment Commission banned bilingual signs from the Queen's University Belfast Student Union because they were "not in accordance with a neutral educational environment," and in 1988 unionists prevented the hanging of a banner reading "Merry Christmas" at a community center because it was in Irish. These last two aptly demonstrate the degree to which Irish usage is perceived as a nationalist statement against British authority, regardless of the context in which it appears. Not only did a simple attempt to normalize the language by using it in a university actually heighten sectarianism, but unionists interpreted something as innocuous as a holiday greeting as a threat (Goldenberg 50-4).

Ironically, the language movement in the North drew strength from the same source that caused discrimination against it. As evidenced by the growth of the *Jail-tacht*, Irish had enormous import as a symbol of resistance, and unionist repression of its public usage only served to more securely attach nationalists to the language. Because the government denied them the opportunity to express their political identity, Northern nationalists clung all the more fiercely to Irish. Lacking the security in their sense of Irishness that southerners gained through self-determination, Northern nationalists have consistently relied on language as a badge of Irish identity, and this heightened awareness of the language's symbolic importance has had the profound practical impact of inspiring people to actually incorporate the language in their daily lives.

An Urban Gaeltacht: The Shaw's Road Community

The reestablishment of Irish as a means of normal communication in the *Gaeltacht* had of course always been a primary goal of the revival movement, but it consistently proved even more difficult than simply maintaining the language in the *Gaeltacht*. Despite the Republic's Irish proficiency requirements for entry into higher education and the civil service, language policy alone was not sufficient to restore any cachet to speaking the language and the absence of practical value in learning to speak Irish, combined with the very real socioeconomic advantage of speaking English, presented a major problem for revivalists, and revival efforts were on the whole unsuccessful. In the North not even the civil service requirement existed as a practical incentive to learn Irish or to raise children to speak it; nonetheless, a few scattered families did make the effort. Isolated urban families continued to raise Irish-speaking children in the mid-twentieth

century and thus proved that such an endeavor was at least feasible, but the overwhelming presence of monoglot English playmates severely restricted usage to the home. Not surprisingly, Irish-speaking children resented this social isolation, and enrollment in English-speaking schools, where well-meaning teachers often paraded them through classrooms as exemplary novelties, heightened their sensitivity to being perceived as "different" from their peers. This discomfort ultimately left many urban native speakers with ambiguous feelings towards the language itself, and some chose not to raise their children with the language out of the fear that social isolation would cause them to hate Irish (Maguire, 1991: 67-9). As much political pressure as the Stormont administration placed upon Irish speakers, the crucial problem lay with the corresponding social pressure to speak English; because the decline of the language resulted more directly from the loss of functional status than language policy, to succeed the revival would need to create a more hospitable socioeconomic situation within which political measures might be effective.

Recognizing the importance of a social network of Irish speakers for expanding the functional value of the language, a group of young learners in the 1960s decided to create a community in which anglicizing pressures could be alleviated such that their children would not encounter the same difficulties that previous generations had. Because they had extended Irish into the social domain and built up a number of personal relationships through the language, they naturally wished to use Irish within their homes, but felt it would be crucial that their children not be forced to revert to English every time they left the home to play, and realized that demands for social and educa-

tional facilities would only be given attention if they came from a cohesive, coordinated group of people rather than individuals scattered across Belfast. Accepting that governmental help in establishing a support network would not be forthcoming, they determined to simply create one for themselves and resolve any political or legal issues as they arose (Maguire, 1991: 71-73). As one founding member expressed it, "We felt the Irish language had to become more than just a cultural pursuit, it had to become involved in the well-being of the general community if it was to be taken seriously" (quoted in O'Reilly, 1999: 44-5). Most attempts to achieve equality for minority groups are flawed by the communities' aspirations to

...rights on a political or symbolic level but not in terms of actual power or in terms of control of their own economy...[they] aspire to rights and recognition within a system...geared towards their own oppression...[the minority community] views each minor concession as a great victory (Ó Donnale, 1997: 205).

Thus, the founders' determination to found a community irrespective of official attitudes or aid marks an important determination to achieve real results rather than mere symbolic gains.

Young, primarily working class people with few financial resources, they faced monumental obstacles including a lack of experience in land purchase and urban planning, time constraints imposed by regular employment and participation in or teaching of night classes, the traditional role of urban centers as anglicizing forces, and the enormity of the linguistic demands they would encounter as recent learners. Nonetheless, having formed a company to meet legal requirements and obtain credit and having secured the assistance of an Irish-speaking architect and lawyer, by 1969 they had completed the first house, largely through their own labor (Maguire, 1991: 71-73). In addi-

tion to their own determination, they were aided by the supportive social climate of the time, including a newly educated nationalist class from Queen's University Belfast, agitation for Catholic civil rights, and the emergence of a new emphasis on parity of esteem (McKee, 1997: 38-41).

By locating themselves all along one street, the founding members of the Shaw's Road Community created an Irish-speaking bloc in which their future children would be able to interact with Irish-speaking playmates rather than being forced to resort to English. The new 'mini-Gaeltacht' allowed Irish speakers to expand their use of the language in normal social interactions, which is particularly important in regards to the children. Among native speakers in the Gaeltacht, Hindley (1990) observed the detrimental effect of a "...dislike of being or seeming different by speaking Irish...few want to feel out of the mainstream, unless they are very secure in life, and only elites enjoy minority status and the 'fishbowl' effect" (209). The formation of the Shaw's Road Community alleviated this problem of 'difference,' which had plagued earlier parents trying to raise Irish-speaking children, by normalizing the use of the language.

Founders also sought to extend the functional use of the language to religion, urging the Bishop of Down and Connor to provide Irish language services for the city's Irish speakers. A series of petitions and requests eventually resulted in weekly Irish Masses in a chapel in the city centre, and local priests soon agreed to provide holy day services and all of the sacraments in Irish as well (Maguire, 1991: 82). This extended Irish use into a more formal, official domain, giving Irish speakers the opportunity to obtain a command of both 'high' and 'low' varieties of the language while simultaneously allowing

them to attend to spiritual matters in their native language. Most children raised with Irish associate religion firmly with Irish rather than English, and the city's Irish language choir has become an important social activity among Shaw's Road teenagers (Maguire, 1991: 168-70). Community children, immersed in an Irish-language environment and accustomed to using it in a variety of domains, could view speaking Irish as a natural part of life rather than a deviation from the norm.

Social Networks

The unique sociopolitical situation in Belfast greatly increased the likelihood that children raised in an Irish-speaking neighborhood would continue to use the language despite anglicizing pressures. While ghettoisation was originally seen as an impediment to revival because restriction to poor areas with little social capital could perpetuate negative perceptions of the functional value of Irish, language advocates ultimately used it to their cultural advantage. Particularly prevalent among the working class, enforced ghettoisation resulting from periodic outbursts of inter-community violence and parallel waves of large-scale population movement has disproportionately affected Catholics (who form the majority of families displaced during peak periods of violence); this pattern of violence and segregation has only served to strengthen within-community bonds. Catholic neighborhoods in particular have become characterized by independent community action and cooperative activities, and West Belfast, home of the Shaw's Road Community, is not only the largest but the most durable and cohesive of the Catholic neighborhoods (Maguire, 1991: 15-18). If "the survival of a dialect or language reflects the strength, density, and self-sufficiency of the social network of its speakers" (Ó Don-

naile, 1997: 200), the West Belfast ghettos have enormous potential to strengthen Irish through normalization mechanisms. Hindley (1990) notes that the Shaw's Road Community has in fact been referenced among evidence for the argument that ghettoisation, particularly in Belfast and Derry, could benefit the language by providing a protective cocoon of "mental walls" within which it could thrive (156).

This pattern is prevalent among traditional urban working-class communities, and phonological dialect distinctions among English speakers have been found across different Belfast neighborhoods (Milroy & Milroy, 1978). These types of distinctions are maintained by social networks whose capacity to impose norms of linguistic behavior increases along with their density and multiplexity. Such networks often include kinship relationships with others in the area and correlate with strong territorial loyalty (Milroy & Margrain, 1981). Not only did members of the Shaw's Road Community have firmly established social relationships centered around Irish language activities when they founded the community, but a number of the families were related as well. The depth of their community involvement is exemplified by a decision during the establishment of the community to halt work on their own homes and use the resources they had gathered to help rebuild a nearby group of homes after they had been burned to the ground, which demonstrated extraordinary cohesion and community solidarity (Maguire, 1991: 73, 15). The type of networks that function to maintain vernacular language are thus fully operational within the community, and this tradition of countering the standard could be used within the context of the Irish language community to en-

force the use of Irish as a communicative norm and counteract anglicizing pressures with a corresponding pressure towards gaelicization.

That such an effect is possible within a bilingual community is affirmed in one of the few studies of bilingual communities to discuss social networks, the 1975 Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Report, which states that

...social control over language use is...operating through networks of friends or acquaintances whose personal knowledge of each other is the guiding factor in explaining preferences of one language over another" (CILAR 1975: 231, quoted in O'Malley-Madec, 2002: 32).

Although this report referred to Irish usage in the South, the observations about the importance of social networks can be expanded to Irish speakers in the North as well. The impact of a network of friends and family upon language usage has enormous implications for language maintenance and shift, particularly within the context of a small community. The creation of the Shaw's Road Community manipulated this social influence to enhance the prestige of Irish within a small community through the enforcement of Irish as the communicative norm.

Irish-medium education

The Community further reinforced the protective effect of such local language loyalty by transforming another major anglicizing force: the educational system. A weekly Irish-medium class/playgroup in one of the homes evolved into Naíscoil Phobal Feirste, which opened in 1966. As the eldest Community children reached primary school age, the Shaw's Road parents became increasingly aware of the potential threat of English schools and determined to provide Irish-medium (IM) education. Thus, parents bought a mobile hut for 100 on a Friday, assembled it over the weekend, and opened the

Bunscoil on Monday with a class of nine and a native speaker as a teacher (Maguire, 1991: 75-6). The new school further addressed the major problem faced by earlier generations of Irish speakers: not only were the Shaw's Road children able to use Irish with their playmates, they could now do so in school as well. Placing Irish in the educational system also helped to restore the more formal, prestigious character essential for maintaining the language (McKee, 1997: 84). The move further normalized the language by extending its communicative function to the educational domain as well as preventing the disastrous feeling of social isolation and 'difference' that would have inevitably arisen had the children progressed to an English-language educational environment.

In addition to providing a valuable service to the Shaw's Road children, the schools helped to raise the language's profile in Belfast and attracted the attention of English speaking parents in the neighboring areas. When the Naíscoil expanded to include English speakers in 1978 it was embraced as a way for monolingual parents to ensure that their children would acquire Irish in a natural and happy environment, and it quickly became an important feeder for the Bunscoil (Maguire, 1991: 76). As enrollment grew, however, parents increasingly came into conflict with the educational authorities and a bitter and protracted 13-year battle for recognition began. The Ministry of Education had met initial inquiries about the possibility of providing IM education with warnings of illegality in the 1960s and, when this failed to deter community members, emphasized reservations about low enrollment and the future of students who would ultimately have to transfer to an English-language school. As the years passed and even inspectors' positive reports about the high quality of education provided failed

to result in any real governmental aid, tensions mounted between the government and the primarily working class parents forced to assume full financial responsibility for the enterprise, largely through fundraising¹⁰. As early as 1978 community members railed against the

...endemic hostility of the educational authorities here to Irish culture in general and the Irish language in particular. Their (particularly the Department's) facilities for stonewalling us are almost inexhaustible (Maguire, 1991: 78).

This protracted battle for grant-aided recognition ended only after representatives from three political parties had lent their support, and by that point official hostility had not only infuriated community members but had provided them with a rallying point.

Without government aid, the community relied on parental involvement and volunteerism and fundraising to maintain the school, and this massive financial burden only served to bind them closer to one another (Maguire, 1991: 78-9). This solidarity allowed parents to maintain the school for 13 years without any government funding, despite the fact that the Bunscoil drew pupils from areas with disproportionately high rates of unemployment, as well as more dependents per household and lower rates of home and car ownership than the city as a whole (Maguire, 1991: 87-92).

This determination to provide quality IM education logically progressed to a desire for secondary education once the Bunscoil's future was secure. A Meánscoil had

¹⁰ The vast majority of schools in Northern Ireland receive government funding; because schools remain divided along denominational lines, with public schools effectively Protestant, schools run by the Catholic Church also receive government aid. The sectarian background means that schools are subdivided into a variety of categories based on background, management structure, and funding. Of these, IM schools fall into the independent (unfunded) and voluntary maintained (state-funded but not managed directly by the educational authorities) categories (Willemssma & Mac Póilin, 1997: 5-7).

operated briefly from 1978-80, when several proficient local teachers agreed to volunteer their free time because parents were unable to pay a full-time secondary teacher in addition to funding the Bunscoil. The Meánscoil was abandoned after two years because it consumed too much of parents' energy, but the fact that it had operated for so long with no resources other than the cooperation of local teachers encouraged parents to believe that a secondary school would naturally succeed if more concrete resources became available. The need for such a school became increasingly apparent as the Bunscoil children transferred to local English schools, where the absence of social opportunities for speaking Irish declined rapidly, particularly for children from English-speaking homes whose relationship with the language depended upon school (Maguire, 1991: 80-2).

Three girls from the Shaw's Road were actually sent to be educated in Dublin after the Meánscoil closed, and community members generally considered these girls the most confident and fluent speakers in their age group. Without the linguistic pressures and influences of their peers in English-speaking peers, they unconsciously used Irish outside of the educational domain because it remained more natural for them to use it with their friends and neighbors. Children who transferred to English secondary schools, however, felt that their use of Irish diminished drastically as their social interactions became dominated by English-speakers (Maguire, 1991: 171-178).

With the importance of continued IM education thus established, parents began to discuss opening a second Meánscoil in 1989, when a man involved in the establishment of an IM secondary school in County Meath in the South addressed a group of them and a committee was elected to examine the feasibility of such a project and begin

work on fundraising. After the committee reported its findings in 1990, work began in earnest to open the Belfast school in 1991, on the twentieth anniversary of the Bunscoil founding. Assuming that government funding for the school was forthcoming, parents began with a confident attitude wholly lacking in hostility towards the authorities, and initially raised only enough money to maintain the school for its first year. However, although the Department of Education lowered the minimum pupil intake necessary to obtain funding from eighty to sixty, educators complained that the lack of funds forced them to restrict intake, creating a Catch-22 whereby they couldn't hope to obtain funding, and relations between Meánscoil proponents and the educational authorities quickly soured; halfway through the Meánscoil's second unfunded year, the school took the British government before the European Court of Human Rights, alleging discrimination compared to Welsh-medium schools¹¹. As pupil intake continued to increase and exam results proved that the school was providing a high standard of education, the funding debate became increasingly acrimonious. Parents campaigned intensively in the Dáil and the House of Commons, fasted publicly before Belfast City Hall on Christmas, publicized their cause in the United States, and held a series of high-profile protests, including one at the Department of Education's headquarters in Wales where stu-

¹¹ The British government has in recent years actively promoted Welsh, particularly in terms of education. As of the Education Reform Act of 1988 for England and Wales, all Welsh children study the language either as a second language or as the medium of instruction, and the Welsh Language Act of 1993 established a Board to promote and facilitate the use of Welsh. Of all the Celtic languages, Welsh has received the most funding and holds the securest place politically (Sutherland, 2000).

dents left a pile of tally sticks¹² on the Department's steps; one pupil even addressed the Dublin Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Irish about the government's 'discriminatory and vindictive' policy. The campaign resulted in very public support, including a personal call to the Prime Minister on the school's behalf from the Irish Taoiseach and SDLP party leaders repeatedly raising the issue with government officials. A one year grant of 100,000 pounds was awarded in 1995, and although the High Court ruled that the Department was not acting illegally by denying the school funding, the Court cited parents' extraordinary dedication and commitment in urging the Department to make an exception to the minimum intake standards. The Meánscoil finally received funding and recognition in 1996, after five years of intensive campaigning and increasing political pressure (O'Reilly, 1999: 124-133).

Although the Meánscoil thus received funding much more quickly than did the Bunscoil, the recognition was in some ways even more important than the original struggle. Political developments in the peace process regarding parity of esteem and equal respect for both of the North's 'two traditions,' as well as the proven viability and high quality of IM education, had encouraged language activists to believe that they had earned government support. Even when the authorities argued that they were only subjecting IM schools to the same standards as English ones, as with the debate over the

¹² As elsewhere, efforts to discourage minority language use included punishing students who spoke their native tongue at school. In nineteenth century Ireland, one of the methods used to enforce an English-only policy required pupils to wear 'tally sticks' around their necks, which were notched each time the child spoke Irish. At the end of the day, children were hit with a cane for each time they had spoken the language. Tally sticks remain one of the most potent symbols of the deep-rooted hostility that led to Padraig Pearse's famous characterization of the national school system as a "murder machine" in regards to Irish.

minimum pupil intake necessary to obtain funding, Irish speakers felt disenfranchised. The founders of the Shaw's Road community and of the Bunscoil had known that government officials firmly opposed expanding the role of the Irish language, while their successes led Meánscoil participants to believe that the government had been won over to their side. Proponents of IM education were no longer content to quietly struggle for years on meager budgets; emboldened by success and community support, they no longer felt that they needed to prove the viability and worth of IM education and simply demanded equal treatment. When the authorities didn't seem to agree, they became embittered, but rather than giving up, only fought harder and more vociferously for recognition. The continued and prolonged battles for IM education only served to increase cohesion within the Irish language community and strengthen parents' determination to provide IM education.

The proven viability of the schools, which at their founding were widely considered a commendable but ultimately futile effort, also generated confidence within the Irish-speaking community and slowly stimulated the growth of IM schools throughout the Six Counties such that the Bunscoileanna have become the fastest growing educational sector in Northern Ireland (McKee, 1997: 91-2); new Irish schools have been opening at a rate of 6-7 a year since 1990 (Goldenberg, 2002: 31). Monolingual English-speaking parents had chosen IM education for their children despite the myriad disadvantages associated with forsaking a well-tested, free school system in favor of an unrecognized and untested program conducted in a language that conferred no economic advantages and only covert prestige. Thus, it should not be surprising that as IM

schools achieved official recognition and funding, thus removing some of the most important perceived disadvantages of IM education, parental demand for the schools surged. Bunscoil parents had originally been attracted by the quality of the education offered, the possibility of enhancing a sense of Irish identity and cultural awareness, aiding the language's survival, and the benefit of their children acquiring a second language (Maguire, 1991: 94-105). Once the schools had proven their efficacy, these advantages would have become increasingly salient. Indeed, the enormous popularity of IM education led the Department of Education to create Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (the Council for Irish-medium Education) in 2000 to oversee the sector.¹³ The organization reports that over seventy IM schools currently educate more than 3,000 Northern Irish children through the Irish language, with new schools regularly opening across the country to meet parental demand for IM education; as of the 2004-5 school year, there are eleven Naíscoilanna¹⁴, eleven Bunscoilanna, and one Meánscoil educating over

¹³ Several organizations had already been operating to represent the sector's interests to the government and provide general resources and support, including Gaeloiliúint, Altram, and An tÁisaonad Lán-Ghaeilge. Nonetheless, the provision of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is immensely significant as it marks the educational authorities' recognition of the growing importance of IM education.

¹⁴ Unfortunately, Naíscoilanna continue to suffer from a lack of funding. When the first schools were founded, preschool was a new concept in Northern Ireland and was not widely available; Irish-medium preschools were often the only options offered. New legislation guaranteeing children one year of preschool thus poses an important problem for IM schools, since Naíscoilanna typically require two years' attendance to ensure adequate linguistic preparation for the Bunscoilanna. With IM schools receiving less funding than English ones the ability to provide quality Irish immersion for their primarily monolingual pupils—including small classes and two years of preschool education—comes increasingly into conflict with the need to compete with the free English-language schools. This is particularly important because the Naíscoilanna provide a way for parents to "test" Irish-medium education before committing to enrollment in a bunscoil (CnaG, 2004b). It can only be hoped that the educational authorities will act on Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta's recommendation to provide Irish schools with equal funding.

1,600 pupils in Belfast alone (www.comhairle.org). Interest in Irish language education has also begun to grow among Protestants; although hostility remains, a sizable proportion of Protestants support the incorporation of Irish language and culture into the curriculum and believe that all schools should give students the opportunity to study the language (Farren, 1996: 59-60).

The growth in IM education is also reflected by the addition of a specialization in IM education at St. Mary's Teacher Training College in Belfast, which has helped to elevate the professional status of the IM educational sector. The creation of a new specialist educational sector has improved the state of Irish by generating a demand for trained teachers (and hence university-level study), books, and other resources. Moreover, as more children pass through the primary schools, the demand for higher level education is increasing such that activists not only predict a growth in IM secondary education but expect that an IM university will soon become necessary (McKee, 1997: 95-6, 99; Goldenberg, 2002: 32).

Diffusion into the Home

In addition to providing a valuable service to Irish-speaking families, IM schools tend to have a "backwash" effect of increased usage in students' homes and more participation in Irish-speaking networks by their parents; Ó Riagáin has argued that these school-based networks have rather successfully integrated even 'reluctant' bilinguals into the Irish-speaking community. Immersed students in the South also expressed a disproportionate commitment to using Irish in their own homes, although the degree to which they actually realize these aspirations is unknown (Murtagh, 2003: 14-5). This

important effect of diffusion of the language into students' home and the larger community was also observed after the establishment of IM education in Belfast. After the original Naíscóil and Bunscoil began admitting children from English-speaking homes, the schools became instrumental in encouraging language revival outside of the Shaw's Road Community. Although all of the children who attended the Bunscoil became functionally fluent, the absence of the language outside of the educational system meant that they might not use Irish once they finished school. While the heart of the revival movement rested in the Shaw's Road, many activists hoped that the IM schools would have a significant impact in expanding Irish usage similar to that observed among the families of IM pupils in Dublin.

The most immediately visible effect was in the homes of the Bunscoil children. Before their children entered, these parents mostly either spoke no Irish at all or knew only a few words, but after their children had completed just one year of nursery school they had mastered enough of the language to be able to read simple pieces and hold basic conversations. This pattern of increasing ability continued for at least a few years as parents learned enough of the language to be able to monitor their children's progress and help with homework. While the overall amount of Irish used in the home as a consequence did not amount to a fundamental shift, there was some increase in ninety percent of the households, and this trend was relative to the children's age such that home usage seems to increase as children continue their education. The change occurred primarily in speech directed towards the children, as most of the parents found it unnatural to speak Irish to each other. It is also important to note that while mothers familiar with

the language spoke it both before and after sending their children to the Bunscoil, only twelve percent of fluent fathers used the language substantially before Bunscoil attendance while more than half did afterwards; knowledge of the language was thus not the only factor influencing these parents' use of it with their children, although the levels of usage and proficiency did generally correspond. Irish use was likewise situational in nature, being most prevalent in situations associated with school life, such as homework, but also commonly spoken at storytime, mealtime, during prayer, shopping (among more fluent families), family walks, and en route to school. Tellingly, Irish was least likely to be used while watching television; the fact that watching television and videos constitutes the primary leisure activity for many of these children, combined with the dearth of Irish language programming, is extremely detrimental to Irish usage. In fact, parents listed television as one of the major obstacles to home usage (Maguire, 1991: 111-122). Importantly, however, studies of similar diffusive effects among Dublin parents had been qualified by the fact that families with children in IM schools were generally of higher social class and education than the general population, and typically already had relatively strong Irish abilities (Murtagh, 2003: 14). Thus, even a qualified increase in Irish usage among working class parents with little previous knowledge of the language is particularly significant.

Unfortunately, Bunscoil parents did not recognize the importance of home use in firmly establishing and maintaining Irish abilities, not regarding limited home use as a threat to their children's academic success. In fact, not only was their use of Irish less extensive than in the Shaw's Road homes, it was more influenced by social pressures.

Thus, parents spoke less Irish in the presence of visitors and relatives unfamiliar with the language. Mothers in particular typically felt most comfortable speaking Irish with their children in the home, where they were the least vulnerable to embarrassment, and tended not to use Irish outside the home, particularly when the general company included non-speakers and Irish usage might be perceived as rude. They were also extremely reluctant to introduce Irish into a conversation and only used Irish if they were addressed in that language. Because these parents lack the confidence to regularly practice speaking outside the home, their ability plateaus, feeding into the rebellion most of the children experienced during their second year of primary school, when a growing awareness of their parents' limited facility in Irish led them to refuse to speak Irish to them, although they continued to do so with others. Although parents did not believe that speaking at home was terribly important, the amount of usage by children generally correlated to that of their parents, particularly how much Irish a parent used with their child's school-friends (Maguire, 1991: 122-9). General speaking ability also typically corresponds strongly to the amount of Irish used outside of school, particularly home usage, as does parental encouragement and involvement (Murtagh, 2003: 155). More awareness among parents about the importance of their linguistic choices would be extremely helpful in maintaining the language, although the fact that they are now using it at all with their children is significant in and of itself.

Irish in the Wider Community

In addition to the frustrations of their parents' lack of fluency, the first of the Bunscoil pupils faced problems similar to those of previous generations raised with the

language, in that the curiosity of neighbors led to their being 'shown off' and the novelty of Irish-speaking children generally made them stand out as different. Isolated from the Shaw's Road children and each other, they had the same problem of limited social interactions with other Irish speakers that the Shaw's Road Community had set out to alleviate. However, the growth of IM education throughout the city has diminished the novelty value of young speakers, alleviating this social pressure (Maguire, 1991: 127-8). As overhearing young children chattering in Irish has become more common in the city, their fluency has inspired adults to learn as well; in fact, most Bunscoil parents believed that their child's immersion had been a major influence on family friends' and relatives' decision to take Irish classes (Maguire, 1991: 145). This sort of diffusion is particularly important because experience in the South has already demonstrated that the educational system cannot effectively restore Irish by itself, while evidence from the United States and Canada of gaps in immersed students' language abilities can also be partially attributed to a lack of opportunities to use the target language outside of class (Cohen, 1996: 196-7). Without a connection between school learning and community use, pupils cease using Irish after graduation and language attrition among adults becomes a significant problem.

Since the founding of the Shaw's Road and the establishment of IM education in the city, a number of positive developments point towards an increased role for Irish in the wider Belfast community. When the 1991 census restored a pre-Partition question about Irish, 142,003 people reported some knowledge of the language and a further 70,000 claimed oral and literate fluency; given that the total number of speakers of Celtic

languages in the United Kingdom was placed at 725,000, this is an extraordinarily high number (McKee, 1997: 79). Moreover, these figures increased slightly such that in the 2001 census 167,490 people reported at least some knowledge of Irish. Although self-reported numbers such as these cannot be taken to be an absolutely accurate reflection of the linguistic abilities of the respondents, the fact that ten percent of the population claimed to know Irish indicates both a high level of prestige for the language and increased access to the language in a country that has historically strongly discouraged Irish language learning and use. Such growth is reflected by a shift away from the previous focus of many activists on more tokenistic aspects of Irish use such as street signage, with evidence of communicative Irish language use now found in the increasing availability of, and demand for, Irish language services and businesses.

The survival of one such service, the Irish language newspaper *Lá*, became a source of great pride among the language community since at the time of its launch in 1981 there were no such national Irish papers in the South despite governmental support for the language. An active sponsor of various educational and cultural initiatives in the city, the paper took on an important role as the publicist for the Gaelgeoir community, with sympathetic news coverage and profiles of those active in the language movement. *Lá* published an enormous amount of editorials and articles relating to the campaigns for funding and political recognition of Irish language schools, organizations and activities. Despite an intermittent dependence on public funding, the paper has shown an overall ability to survive difficult times, including accusations that it was a front for Sinn Féin (while sharing space with *Glór na nGael* in 1989; see below). *Lá* also boasts a sub-

stantial readership in the South, primarily in Dublin, which did not significantly diminish after the Irish government began sponsoring a successful competing Irish language paper (McKee, 1997: 51, 72-4). Prominent Northern Gaeilgeoir Gearóid Ó Cairealláin summarized the paper's importance when he asserted his belief that "The paper gives literary impetus to the Gaeilgeoiri vision of a parallel society in the Six Counties; one in which the services of the state and its infrastructure are provided within the medium of Irish" (quoted in McKee, 1997: 74).

Increased Gaeilgeoir confidence as a result of the success of Lá inspired important new initiatives such as the founding of the *Culturlann McAdam/Ó Fiaich*, an Irish culture and arts center named for two prominent local activists (Presbyterian Robert McAdam and Catholic Tomás Cardinal Ó Fiaich). The *Culturlann* originally housed Lá's offices and *Meánscoil Féirste*, as well as several commercial organizations that had grown in response to community demand for their services (McKee, 1997: 72). The center now houses a tourist office; art gallery; café; theater; *Comhluadar*, a group representing Irish speaking families; an Irish language choir; a book shop; a traditional singing circle; a walking club; *Aisling Ghéar*, a professional theater company; *Aisling Ghéar Films*, which produces cultural and political films as well as television programming; *Raidió Fáilte*; a design studio; *Gaeloiliúnt*, a group that promotes IM education; and *Pobal*, an umbrella organization for the Irish speaking community of Northern Ireland. Additionally, the *Culturlann* sponsors educational and cultural events such as language classes, literary readings, music and drama workshops, concerts, theater productions, and art exhibitions (www.culturlann.ie). Although the *Culturlann* does receive support

from several governmental bodies, the proven viability of the commercial enterprises it houses demonstrates the current strength of the language movement in Belfast. The demand for such Irish language services is a powerful indicator of the revival's increasing success at creating competent bilinguals motivated to use the language in their everyday lives.

In addition to such cultural provisions, Belfast's Irish-speaking community has begun to explore the possibility of expanding the language into more practical areas. Specifically, economic development in terms of employment and business initiatives has been given increasing attention. The most prominent of these efforts is Forbairt Feirste, established in 1995 and modeled on a Welsh group, which identifies possible employment opportunities for Irish speakers. The organization used funding from the Northern Ireland Training and Employment Agency to set up two IM training courses (in Media Studies and Business Administration) to teach speakers how to operate their own small businesses (McKee, 1997: 74). Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta's plan to provide IM vocational education and improved career guidance has a similar aim of establishing the language in the workplace and increasing its economic value (CnaG, 2004a: 11-31).

Perhaps the most significant evidence of Irish's expanded role in the community has been a shift away from rigidly symbolic interpretations of the language's importance. Although Irish maintains enormous importance as a symbol of cultural resistance for nationalists and continues to be perceived as a threat by many unionists, its normalization has made this less true of younger people. Overall the younger generation doesn't seem to perceive the language as being very politically charged, and young peo-

ple are more likely to cite cultural reasons for speaking Irish than political ones (Goldenberg, 2002: 71). This is particularly true of those who have actually been raised with Irish, who discuss the language in very specific, local terms; for these speakers, Irish is simply a part of life, albeit an important one (O'Reilly, 1999: 80-1). This shift in language attitudes strongly indicates that many young speakers have thoroughly integrated Irish into their lives. For them it has become an everyday form of communication and self-expression rather than a symbol, a far more encouraging sign of language strength than any new language policy.

Belfast Irish: Issues of Linguistic Purism

As Gaeilgeoirí gain increasing confidence in their fluency and Irish usage in the city rises, issues of linguistic purity have become more salient. Language enthusiasts have long had a somewhat antagonistic relationship with native speakers in the Gaeltacht, who resent intimations that they speak 'incorrectly'¹⁵ or frivolously abandon Irish and often highly resent the expropriation of *their* language by comparatively wealthy people who not only do not suffer the economic pressures to use English but actually benefit from Irish in terms of careers in the Republic's government (Hindley, 1990: 41). The traditional dichotomy between the language attitudes of the two communities, with

¹⁵ After making Irish an official language, the government of the Republic created a standardized written form of modern Irish, the dialects of which vary widely by region. Native speakers often disdain the artificiality of standardized 'book' or 'Dublin' Irish and naturally resent assertions that their own, highly idiomatic speech is grammatically incorrect because it differs from this standard; likewise, native speakers find Gaeilgeoirí criticisms of their use of English borrowings rather than the officially-coined neologisms offensive. Native speakers find 'Dublin' Irish difficult to understand because of the use of neologisms, archaic words and phrases, and the mixing of dialects, while learners find rapid, idiomatic native speech largely incomprehensible (Hindley, 1990: 41; Kabel, 2000: 135-6).

native speakers taking a much more pragmatic view of Irish than Gaeilgeoirí committed to “Irish for Irish’s sake,” has caused additional friction. Learners have nonetheless traditionally turned to the native speakers in the Gaeltacht as an important point of reference; however, this is changing as Northern Gaeilgeoirí redefine ‘Belfast’ Irish as a dialect in its own right. Maintaining that since they have a distinct Belfast accent in English it’s only natural that they should have one in Irish as well, many speakers remain extremely loyal to Belfast speech and see no reason to look to the Gaeltacht (Kabel, 2000: 135-7).

The growth of some speakers’ belief that Belfast Irish is actually better than Gaeltacht speech because it incorporates fewer English loans alarms others in the movement, who compare the situation to learners of French who will only speak to other learners (Kabel, 2000: 137). Maguire (1991) in particular has articulated concerns about the nature and velocity of linguistic change in Belfast. The scarcity of adult native speakers has meant that children raised with Irish acquired many of their L2 parents’ structural simplifications, many of which parallel the changes that have occurred in moribund Celtic dialects, while the revival’s focus on encouraging *any* effort to use Irish has the potential to so thoroughly adulterate Irish that it would cease to remain a distinct language. She points to her analysis of linguistic developments among the new generation of native speakers as evidence of heavy English influence and possibly the beginning of a precipitous “landslide” into English (186-228).

Assessing the relative ‘purity’ of Belfast Irish is particularly difficult given that the language has been undergoing numerous structural changes over the course of the

past century, including the extinction of the dative case and the erosion of the genitive. English influence also has a somewhat ambiguous nature, since borrowing often reflects greater confidence and facility in the language rather than a lack of Irish fluency; native speakers typically borrow more extensively from English than learners, and the use of English discourse markers in particular marks an ability to meaningfully shift to a more informal style rather than disfluency (O'Malley-Madec, 2002: 173, 189). However, the most salient English influence on Belfast Irish is structural rather than lexical, principally in the erosion of those structural components that learners find most difficult to master. The most important of these changes has been the general weakening of lenition outside of a few petrified phrases; initial consonant mutation through lenition and eclipsis¹⁶ conveys important information in the Celtic languages such that their disappearance limits comprehensibility (Maguire, 1991: 202-3). The weakening of this mutation system thus has profound structural and semantic consequences, and has been one of the main causes of concern among commentators. However, such concern must be tempered by the fact that native speakers' application of lenition also seems to be changing (O'Malley-Madec, 2002: 108-9). The prevalence of such change among native speakers makes it extremely difficult to evaluate the extent to which modifications in Belfast Irish

¹⁶ Irish conveys many grammatical features either partially or entirely by initial consonant mutations; functions of mutation include distinguishing feminine and masculine in the nominative case and indicating the use of the genitive or vocative cases. Mutation occurs in two main forms: eclipsis or nasalization, represented in writing by the insertion of a lower case letter (e.g. *Béal Feirste* → *Tá mé i mo chónaí i mBéal Feirste*, 'I live in Belfast'); and lenition, which turns stops to fricatives, /m/ → /v/, and /f/ → /f̪/, represented in writing by the insertion of a letter 'h' (e.g. *Brighid* → *a Bhrighid* in the vocative). Mutations have a number of triggers, including prepositions, possessive adjectives, adjectival prefixes, and the numerical particle (O'Malley-Madec, 2002: 102-5).

are simply part of a natural evolution rather than symptomatic of language decline; many commentators' conclusions in fact rest upon theoretical theoretical positions on language purity and the acceptability of change, since the "pervasive tenet that equates change with decay" is particularly relevant to work with minority languages (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994: 61-3). Dorian (1994) believes that the Shaw's Road indicates that the price of language survival and a new generation of speakers may be structural compromise and change. She also cites the strength and integrity of English after heavy incursions from Norman French as evidence that structural compromise does not necessitate the loss of linguistic integrity, and consequently argues that since such compromise improves the probability of survival it must be accepted as a necessary aspect of minority language maintenance (479, 490).

Language Attitudes and Discursive Practice

The strengthening revival movement in Belfast has also helped to reframe the terms in which the language is discussed. There has long been debate about the nature and function of Irish within the revival movement itself, with Irish language activists traditionally divided according to which of two competing discourses they use; O'Reilly (1997) terms these *decolonizing discourse* and *cultural discourse*. Vehemently nationalistic, decolonizing discourse portrays language as inherently political. A prominent member of Sinn Féin's famous declaration that "Every word of Irish spoken is like another bullet being fired in the struggle for Irish freedom" exemplifies a widespread conceptualization of Irish as a potent anti-British political and cultural weapon. Although the manner in which such views are expressed has been somewhat tempered, the central conviction

that speaking Irish is an essentially political act remains unmoderated. Historically, language activists with a firmly cultural perception of the language have opposed this perspective by firmly advocating for the complete separation of Irish from politics; in this case, politics may be implicitly understood to mean 'republicanism,' a veiled reference to the association between Irish and nationalism. Drawing on cultural rather than political nationalism, cultural discourse espouses an 'Irish for Irish's sake' philosophy emphasizing the inherent value of the language as a beautiful means of expressing ethnic identity (99-102). This dichotomy within the language movement may be traced back to the turn of the century revival, when a fractitious debate over the role of political nationalism led to Douglas Hyde's resignation as president of Conradh na Gaeilge; at that time, the decolonization view became far more prominent and the link between speaking and/or advocating the Irish language and political nationalism became firmly established in the minds of the general public.

Decolonizing discourse seemed, essentially, to have won the struggle for the "...right to define the political significance, meaning, and symbolism of the Irish language" (Goldenberg, 2002: 45), but this state of events changed significantly in the latter part of the twentieth century. As the growing strength of the Irish language movement in the Northern state—and in West Belfast in particular—put increasing pressure on the government to recognize and legitimize use of the language, officials turned towards cultural discourse in an effort to neutralize the political effects of the symbolic importance Irish held for nationalists. After the establishment of the ULTACH Trust (see below), cultural discourse became the approved, officially sanctioned manner of discuss-

ing Irish, and the new availability of British funding for Irish language activities made the use of cultural discourse imperative in securing grant money (O'Reilly, 1997: 106-7). Official condemnation or approval of political acts in support of the language largely depends upon who is doing the campaigning, such that Sinn Féin involvement will be condemned in contexts where other groups might not be. This fiercely anti-Republican rhetoric is characterized by accusations that Sinn Féin and republicans in general have not only politicized the language but have 'hijacked it' (O'Reilly, 1999: 35-9). However, the government's preference for cultural rhetoric caused additional resentment among the very community that the new language initiatives were meant to placate. Suspicious that new funding initiatives were motivated by a hope to control the burgeoning revival through grant money, many felt that concerted efforts to attract unionists and fund Protestant initiatives unjustly slighted dedicated nationalists working in West Belfast (O'Reilly, 1997: 112-5). Funding of (typically more wealthy) Protestant areas also fed into the republican characterization of those using cultural discourse as elitists who restrict Irish to the middle class (Goldenberg, 2002: 66). Nonetheless, the success of the British establishment's efforts to force a cultural view of Irish (or at least the use of cultural rhetoric) may be measured by the fact that in a 1995 speech Sinn Féin Northern Chairman Gearóid Ó hÉara argued that all government services should be provided in Irish because the English-only policy was "...robbing unionists of a vital part of their cultural heritage" (quoted in Goldenberg, 2002: 36).

Although still important, the dominance of cultural discourse began to wane after the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (see below) and its use is no

longer necessary to obtain government funding (O'Reilly, 2002: 181). Its place of importance has been ceded to the newly emergent *rights discourse*, which adapts discourses of civil, human, and minority rights to advocate for the rights of Irish speakers while simultaneously broadening and reframing the political/apolitical dichotomy. Asserting that speakers are entitled to the right to speak Irish as a form of expression, advocates challenge the idea that proponents of an 'apolitical' cultural view of Irish are actually advocating depoliticizing the language (as opposed to simply dissociating it from republicanism), while simultaneously avoiding the prevalent association with republicanism. They answer accusations that republicans, in particular Sinn Féin, have 'hijacked' the language by asserting that 'hijacking' a language is simply not possible; as one enthusiast said, "I've got no time for people who criticize Sinn Féin for hijacking the language. What, can you put Irish in a little tin box, like *tiocfaidh ar lá*¹⁷ or something?" (quoted in O'Reilly, 1999: 41). They often add a challenge to unionist politicians and others to 'hijack' the language themselves by using it and asserting their own claim to the language as part of their heritage. Rather than advocating the depoliticization of Irish, they hope to increase its political importance and believe that *all* political parties should promote the language. In fact, they tend to be highly critical of public figures who do not actively promote Irish, and they argue that if more republicans than unionists are involved in the movement, the fault lies with unionists' lack of interest and republicans should not be accused of promoting the language only to further their own ends. Another common

¹⁷ *Tiocfaidh ar lá*, meaning 'our day will come,' is one of the most-widely known political slogans used by Sinn Féin.

argument states that speaking Irish is (or should be) analogous to speaking English: since a wide array of political positions are discussed in English without implying that the language belongs to one group, the same can be done in Irish. One man expressed this when he said

...is English kept out of politics? Don't people say what they want in English? Why shouldn't they say what they want in Irish?...If you can't promote what you believe in, what use is the language? A language is for saying your deepest feelings...if your deep feelings are Republican and you say it, and the same thing, if your deep feelings are Loyalist, why shouldn't you say it in Irish? (quoted in O'Reilly, 1999: 60-1).

This conception of Irish has the potential of further normalizing its usage by emphasizing its communicative rather than symbolic function; speaking Irish is no longer an exceptional political or cultural act, but merely a form of expression fundamentally the same as speaking English.

Changes in Public Policy

The shift in discursive practices mirrors the shift towards a more inclusive language policy in the Northern State. At the same time that the Shaw's Road and IM education were gathering strength, nationalists gained increasing political power. With the political and social upheavals of the civil rights era nationalist parties such as Sinn Féin and the SDLP became increasingly vocal in seeking parity of esteem for Irish culture, including proportionate funding and legal entitlement for the language in education, the media, community affairs, public administration. Rejecting the Northern Ireland Office's claims of existing cultural equality, they demanded that Irish be accorded the same status and rights as Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, pointing to spiteful gestures by local councils as evidence of government hostility (McKee, 1997: 53-4). Eventually, the com-

bination of political demands and the growing demographic strength of the language revival resulted in a relaxing of official anti-Irish hostility.

This more accommodating attitude was reflected in one of the most significant and innovative of efforts to resolve political conflict in the North, the 1985 Anglo-Irish Accord. Co-signed by the British and Irish governments, the agreement explicitly recognized the need to respect Irish cultural traditions and prevent economic and social discrimination, with obvious benefits for the Irish language, while the creation of a joint conference to monitor the application of the treaty's provisions ensured that Irish culture had an influential sponsor. Evidence of the accord's impact can be seen in the government funding of the *Culturlann*, which leased its premises from the Catholic diocesan agency and then was paid rent by its 'tenant' organizations (McKee, 1997: 69, 72). Additionally, the Irish Taoiseach made his entire speech regarding the signing of the accord in Irish, an important symbolic rejection of Britain and affirmation of Irish nationalism. The agreement marked a turning point towards official tolerance of and equality for Irish (Goldenberg, 2002: 26).

As a result of the new spirit of equality enshrined in the accord, two Cultural Traditions Group conferences were held to explore the political and cultural identities of both of the two traditions. These conferences resulted in the Northern Ireland Office's 1989 establishment of the ULTACH (Ulster Language, Traditions, and Cultural Heritage)¹⁸ Trust, or *Iontabhas ULTACH*, to promote the Irish language (O'Reilly, 1997: 106). However, this conciliatory effort on the part of the government was met with hostility

¹⁸ *Ultach* is also the Irish for Ulster.

and suspicion among the Irish language community, which believed that the authorities were using the granting and withholding of funding as a way of controlling the Irish language movement. Many in West Belfast resented the Trust's emphasis on attracting Protestants rather than concentrating on using government funding to strengthen the existing revival efforts in their own community, and this hostility was heightened by an unbalanced Board of Trustees that failed to represent nationalists (O'Reilly, 1997: 113-5); one young man protested that the Trust was "...almost making the language a prostitute, selling it to some people yet keeping it from others with their money which they won't give to all organizations" (quoted in O'Reilly, 1999: 58-9). The Northern Ireland government's position that to warrant funding projects should be accessible to Protestants simply repelled many activists who believed that support for minority group efforts should not be contingent upon their attractiveness to majority group members (Ó Donnai, 1997: 203). Commentators also complained about a perceived lack of fluency among ULTACH's staff and the organization's generally reactive rather than proactive approach (Goldenberg, 2002: 27). One Gaeilgeoir expressed rampant fears that funding would decrease self-sufficiency within the movement:

When it was blocked people got on fine, but now that they've stuck a teat on it and feed down a trickle of milk, people become dependent on it, and when it's withdrawn we're fucked because people won't be willing or able to do for themselves anymore (quoted in O'Reilly, 1999: 109).

However, community reaction to the Glór na nGael controversy shortly after ULTACH's founding seems to indicate that such fears are unjustified. Glór na nGael had several times won a major cross-border award for promoting Irish in everyday life and provided a number of services for speakers and learners of the language, including classes

held in 'neutral' areas of the city to help attract Protestants. In 1990, suddenly and without explanation, the organization's Belfast office received notice of the withdrawal of funding. The loss of funding for teachers' and aides' salaries affected 7/8 of the city's IM nursery schools and was interpreted as an attack on the Irish language movement and West Belfast as a whole. A massive campaign to restore funding began within weeks, including picketing government offices, a letter-writing campaign, and newspaper editorials; the Trustees of the ULTACH Trust even took the unusual step of offering their public support. The campaign eventually resulted in the restoration of funding, but the government's refusal to allow Glór na nGael access to any of the documents relevant to the case or present any evidence reinforced popular suspicions about ULTACH and the motivation behind official funding and seriously heightened hostility towards the British government. Importantly, however, the community solidly closed ranks around the organization, with the debate about whether to end the campaign carried out entirely in Irish—primarily through editorials in *Lá*—and hence carefully avoided exposing divisions within the movement (O'Reilly, 1997: 119-127). This steadfast loyalty demonstrated the Irish-speaking community's solidarity and sent a clear message that the movement could not be controlled; government efforts to provide language activists with practical support would need to be sincere.

That linguistic rights became a major issue in the drafting of peace accords further highlights the growing importance of the Irish-language lobby. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement included provisions to promote, facilitate, and encourage Irish use and remove restrictions on usage, granting official recognition to the language and outlining

a series of commitments by the British government to expand Irish in the domains of education, administration, and the broadcast media (Mac Giolla Chríost, 2003: 84). Section 6 clause 3 of the accord specified that "All participants recognize the importance of respect, understanding, and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots¹⁹ and the languages of the various other ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland" (quoted in Goldenberg, 2002: 89). Although informed by a "top-down" approach to language planning and policy, the agreement's provision that planning should take the "desires and sensitivities of the community" into account invited engagement with local communities and thus neatly melded the "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches (Mac Giolla Chríost, 2003: 85). Additionally, the all-Ireland basis of language promotion implied by 'island of Ireland' further solidified cross-border relationships, which was extremely difficult for unionists to accept. The implementation of the agreement led to the creation of new government language bodies and the development of a language policy by the new Linguistic Diversity Branch of the Department of Culture, Arts, and Leisure; additionally, a cross-border organization devoted to Irish, Forás na Gaeilge, was created (Goldenberg, 2002: 89-90). However, with Irish now receiving official recognition, new conflicts arose over 'ownership' of the language and how it could be promoted to the benefit of both communities; Irish speakers were dismayed by the appointment of a man who had repeatedly voted to ban Irish use in Belfast City Hall as

¹⁹ Note that the drafters of the Agreement carefully avoided the language/dialect debate in relation to Ulster-Scots (a variety of Scots, which is derived from northern dialects of early English) by not referring to Ulster-Scots as either a language or a dialect. Later legislation specific to Northern Ireland does in fact accord Ulster-Scots status as a distinct language.

the Minister responsible for the language, while unionists were furious over the appointment of a Sinn Féin Gaeilgeoir as Minister of Education (Goldenberg, 2002: 90-1).

Complicating the 'ownership' battle, the implementation of the agreement has made decolonizing discourse essentially defunct in public usage, with nationalists shifting to a more rights-centered position (O'Reilly, 2002: 181). Thus, Sinn Féin members have begun to use Irish in the Assembly, while the SDLP requests bilingual documents and the appointment of Irish speakers to important education posts (Goldenberg, 2002: 90); they frame this public Irish usage in terms of the minority linguistic rights enshrined in the agreement. Unsurprisingly, Assembly usage infuriates unionists, who rail against the additional time and expense translation requires and frequently dispute the idea that Irish usage is a right. One unionist interrupted an Irish speaker in 2000 to argue that her use of "the language of the leprechauns that nobody understands" placed her in contempt of the House (Goldenberg, 2002: 91-3); others threaten to retaliate by using Ulster-Scots²⁰ (O'Reilly, 2002: 184). Hence, although the Good Friday Agreement accorded official status and recognition to the Irish language and its speakers, the underlying hostility of many in the government remains.

Nonetheless, political support for the advancement of the Irish speaking community has continued to strengthen over the past decade, with the Northern Ireland Office bowing to persistent pressure and beginning to offer assistance. In the 1997 local

²⁰ Ulster-Scots has been pushed by many radical unionists as an 'opposing' minority language in recent years (Goldenberg, 2002: 85-6). Economic decline and changing government policies over the past several decades have presented enormous challenges to Protestants' identity and many have turned to the Ulster-Scots movement. It seems to have only limited appeal for much of the Protestant community, but has nonetheless become symbolically important in opposition to Irish (McCoy & O'Reilly, 2003; Nic Craith, 2003: 64-7).

elections, the Unionists lost their majority in the Belfast City Council and a nationalist became the city's Lord Mayor, replacing a hostile local government with one that prioritized parity of esteem for Irish. Meanwhile, Sinn Féin and the SDLP, with active Gaeilgeoirí members and firmly pro-Irish policies, have gained an increasingly important role within government bodies, allowing them to provide enormous political and economic support to language initiatives; for the first time, Irish speakers have an important and highly vocal group of advocates in the government (McKee, 1997: 75-6).

The Impact of European Integration

European integration has the potential to profoundly alter the position of minority European languages in general, Irish among them, and a number of recent legislative developments point to a growing awareness of the importance of linguistic rights. Indeed, although the intimate link between language conflicts and violent political conflicts has led opponents to argue that support and recognition for minority languages fuels separatism and division (O'Reilly, 2003: 28), a state's tolerance for minority languages seems to be an important determinant of both internal and external stability (Packer, 2003: 76-7). This naturally inclines leaders towards adopting a more proactive approach towards linguistic conflict, and the European Union has shown increasing support for autochthonous minority languages; however, the language policies developed are extremely weak and there is often some ambiguity as to the extent to which policies may be applied (Ó Riagáin, 1991).

The most prominent effort to protect minority languages is the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), which asserts that states have an obliga-

tion to take action on behalf of speakers in a variety of areas including education, communication with the authorities, public services, mass media, economic and social life, and trans-frontier exchanges. Together with similar documents it establishes standards and defines practice under which it is no longer acceptable to suppress minority tongues either actively or by neglect (Hogan-Brun & Wolff, 2003: 4). The ECRML's origins may be traced to a 1984 public debate on regional and minority languages, but it only came into force officially in 1998, and not by unanimous vote. Member states first sign the document and then ratify it, with ratification formally requiring the adoption of certain measures (Nic Craith, 2003: 56-9). However, either level of commitment is optional, and individual states retain considerable discretion over the level of recognition provided—not least because they are only required to accede to thirty-five of the Charter's sixty-eight articles (May, 2003: 215). In addition to the weakness of the ECRML in terms of actual implementation, there has been some concern that the Charter has been extended beyond its original intentions in generating 'new' languages by groups eager for their speech varieties to be recognized as languages rather than dialects (Nic Craith, 2003: 67); this has the effect of further alienating states already so hostile to the promotion of minority and regional languages within their borders that they have tried to remove funding for the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages from the EU budget²¹ (Ó Riagáin, 2001: 24).

²¹ Much of the early support for the Bureau came from the government of the Republic of Ireland, which provides much of the Dublin-based Bureau's funding. Irish ministers also single-handedly assured the restoration of EU funding when the Budget Council tried to drop it by blocking the entire EU budget until the Bureau's grant was restored (Ó Riagáin, 2001: 24-5).

Such flaws in this comprehensive statement in favor of minority languages demonstrate the overall weakness of the EU's language policy. Thus, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)'s provision for the right to be informed of the reason for arrest and the nature and cause of an accusation and the right to an interpreter in court specifies only that these must be carried out in a language understood by the defendant, not the mother tongue or language of choice. Rulings by the High Court explicitly state that various articles may not be combined to obtain such a right, and that the ECHR's provision of administrative equality does not extend to a guarantee of the right to use a non-dominant language in administrative matters such as elections (Henrad, 2003: 43-4). The court has also ruled that the ECHR does not imply an obligation to accommodate parents' language preferences in education²², although more recent cases' acknowledgement that a lack of mother-tongue education denies the "substance" of guaranteed rights indicates a move towards a less rigid interpretation (Henrad, 2003: 45-6). The inclusion of a statement urging the funding of the Meánscoil in the court's ruling in favor of the Department of Education exemplifies this burgeoning shift away from strict interpretations of the legislation.

The greatest potential for a positive EU impact upon threatened languages likely lies in its ability to change national attitudes rather than language policy per se. Because the economic necessity of learning a dominant language rather than repressive language

²² The European Charter, however, does specify that education in a non-dominant language should be provided when there is sufficient demand for it. Sutherland (2000) has pointed out that this leaves the problem of defining what comprises "sufficient" demand (200); as discussed above, this issue has in fact been raised repeatedly in regards to IM education in the North and the minimum number of pupils a school must have to obtain government funding.

policies typically represents the most significant factor in language death, it is extremely doubtful that supportive legislation alone can reverse language shift; the provision of adequate language rights is not sufficient to engender conditions in which linguistic minorities can thrive (Hogan-Brun & Wolff, 2003: 5-6). In fact, not only does protective legislation not guarantee equality in practice, problems with the implementation of language laws can exacerbate existing tensions between minority groups and the authorities (Packer, 2003: 89). Hence, although protective measures on the part of the EU are laudable, their questionable efficacy lends them less practical importance than the transformation in attitudes towards states augured by the growth of European integration, and non-linguistically oriented economic and social integration policies are more likely to affect language shift (Ó Riagáin, 1991). Such integration indicates a shift away from European focus on the nation-state, and this orientation towards a more pluralistic society could potentially ease the integration of minorities by reducing the threat that they pose in a state ideally conceived of as ethnically homogenous. The nation-state currently remains the normative reference point for people in Northern Ireland (O'Reilly, 2001: 97); however, the Welsh and Scottish minorities within the United Kingdom have already begun to turn to Europe as an alternative sphere of influence, and the EU has increasingly assumed a role as an important forum for minority groups to express their problems and maneuver outside of the nation-states in which they are subsumed (May, 2003: 215-7). There is thus enormous potential for the pluralistic motives driving current European integration to positively affect public perceptions of minorities and fundamentally alter the ideal of the nation-state underlying current legislation and policy.

Conclusion

Drawing largely on the symbolic nationalist import that Irish holds for the North's disenfranchised Catholic population, the West Belfast Irish revival movement has grown exponentially over the past few decades and gained increasing political force. Importantly, the movement's momentum has come from grass-roots efforts, forming a "bottom-up" counterpoint to the failed "top-down" approach of language revitalization employed in the Republic. In fact, much of the importance of the current revival's successes lies in the way that the northern movement differs from revival in the South. Thus, the impetus of the Belfast revival comes from the working class people who comprise much of the population rather than the middle class intellectuals who drove revival in the Republic; activists manipulated covert prestige and social networks' norm-enforcing mechanisms such that Irish has been embraced by those who traditionally labor under the greatest economic pressure to adopt the dominant language.

Hindley (1990), in his conclusions about the state of the language, wrote that "the little networks in west Belfast, etc., are noteworthy, admirable in their way, but are not credible in terms of language revival, maintenance, or sustained bilingualism" because the northern revival was "entirely consistent with tokenism rather than normal everyday communicative usage" (157-60). However, it is precisely because so many people *have* adopted Irish as a language of everyday communication that the Belfast revival is so remarkable. Hindley's claim that most northern revival activity centers around symbolic usage, such as Irish street signs and IRA units speaking Irish to confuse British soldiers, simply does not reflect the core group of West Belfast Gaeilgeoirí who have sys-

tematically extended Irish into a variety of domains including the educational system, the Catholic Church, homes, and a growing number of small businesses. The businesses, in particular, would be unable to survive if there was not significant demand from the community to carry out everyday tasks in Irish, while if the revival's momentum relied solely on symbolism it would be expected that Irish use would have declined after the language was granted official status—similar to what happened in the *Jaitacht* when Irish was no longer banned—but Irish educational, cultural, and business initiatives have continued to mushroom. Additionally, the younger generation of speakers raised with the language increasingly reject a narrowly symbolic interpretation of Irish, seeing it instead as simply a part of life—a beloved part of life, perhaps, but not a practically useful or identity-defining part; effectively, the same position held by the native speakers in the *Gaeltacht* Hindley looks to as the only hope for Irish as a living language. Although many *Gaeilgeoirí* were undoubtedly inspired to learn and begin using Irish by the political situation, they have continued to use it because bold new initiatives such as the *Shaw's Road* integrated Irish into their lives.

Irish has become a significant part of West Belfast life, and the language attitudes of the city's youngest generations offers the promise that the language's position will continue to strengthen. The key problem now facing revivalists is to maintain the movement's momentum, and the combination of widespread enthusiasm for the language and the pragmatism of both local *Gaeilgeoirí* and new organizations such as the *Comhairle na nGaelscolaíochta* in terms of the importance of creating support structures within which the language can survive bodes well for the future of Irish revitalization

efforts. Their realistic assessment of the practical needs of Irish speakers is undoubtedly one of the core reasons for the comparative success of revival in the North, and the current movement provides a number of important lessons about effective language planning in terms of the need for such pragmatism, as well as real commitment and determination from speakers rather than government officials.

Glossary of Important Terms

Bunscoil (pl. Bunscoileanna):	Primary or elementary school (Irish-medium)
Comhaltas Uladh:	Autonomous but affiliated Ulster branch of Conradh na Gaeilge, founded after partition
Conradh na Gaeilge:	“The Gaelic League,” an organization founded by prominent Gaeilgeoir Douglas Hyde in 1893 to promote and preserve Irish; Hyde resigned as president after losing a battle to keep the organization apolitical
Gaeilgeoir (pl. Gaeilgeoirí):	A proponent of the language; sometimes used to include all speakers, but usually refers specifically to a language enthusiast or activist, often with negative connotations when used by native speakers to refer to revivalists or government officials speaking ‘Dublin Irish’
Gaeltacht (pl. Gaeltachtaí):	An Irish-speaking area or region; the traditional Gaeltacht is now largely confined to the westernmost coastal areas of counties Galway, Donegal, and Kerry.
Galltacht:	English-speaking area (i.e. non-Gaeltacht)
Meánscoil:	Secondary school (Irish-medium)
Naíscoil (pl. Naíscoileanna):	Nursery school (Irish-medium)
Republicanism:	Political position rejecting British authority in Ireland; associated with Catholics and Irish nationalists
Sinn Féin:	“We Ourselves,” nationalist/republican political party with links to the IRA; provides Irish with political and financial support
Social Democratic & Labour Party (SDLP):	Nationalist political party, more moderate than Sinn Féin; support for Irish tends not to be proactive
Unionism:	Political position favoring continued union between Northern Ireland and Britain; associated with Protestants

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