

A Celtic Trio with Universal Application

COMMENTARY



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All these papers reveal that a great deal has been achieved in the Celtic context since the 1950s and further that the reforms have been undertaken largely in the absence of conscious language planning and enabling legislation.

Robert Dunbar's excellent paper provides a broad sweep evaluation of the structural characteristics of the Gaelic-speaking population of Scotland, which is generalisable albeit at different scales to all Celtic contexts. The Gaelic speaking population is aged with relatively low, not to say alarming, rates of inter-generational transmission. Sizeable proportions live outside the heartland but in areas where there is very little demolinguisitic concentration. This makes it difficult to maintain viable schools with reasonable catchment areas, to produce active socio-cultural networks, to improve literacy rates and to make broadcasting in Gaelic an essential element for entertainment, information and identity construction. The key question thus becomes "How does one sustain a virtual network of speakers?" Gaelic has lacked strong government backing, there has not been a well articulated and consistent official policy specifying its role in society, Scottish devolution promised new opportunities for growth but progress is slow.

A Gaelic Language Act came into effect in April 2005 which gave statutory authority to Bòrd na Gàidhlig and obliges public bodies to produce language plans. We

may ask who has power within the system to regulate language plans and their impact and how does the absence of citizen language rights influence the perception of the role of Gaelic within an Equal Opportunities agenda? Conscious of this deficit Dunbar argues that by requiring bodies such as economic and social development agencies, health care bodies etc to prepare language plans, recent legislation allows for the Bòrd to implement a much more coherent and widespread language regime in particular locales than a rights regime may have permitted. This is a pragmatic, sensible and realistic telling of half the story, admittedly a strong half, but what happens when, based upon the Welsh experience, the implementation of these plans is found to be wanting? Apart from a name and shame approach there are no real penalties or court redress if such schemes fail to deliver bilingual public services. The Bòrd will find that in extremis it has very little power to force compliance. Neither does legislation nor current planning cut deeply into private sector behaviour where both demographic and attitudinal differences in various parts of the country and within particular age and socio-economic groups render Gaelic essential/optional/irrelevant to transactions. But Dunbar is correct to argue that

taking advantage of the new opportunities is far more than an atomised individual decision-making process. It relies to a great extent on developments in the lexicon, in specialist terminology, in corpus planning and in social mores. I acknowledge that a strong legislative regime is not always appropriate to effect behaviour, but in times of acute crisis it can provide and anchor and stability and create room to breathe. Nevertheless what is striking in this case is the relative absence of an enabling legal framework for in Scotland, unlike Canada, the law is not a major dynamo driving language policy forward.

Many of these issues reappear in **John Welsh's** stimulating and hard hitting paper; the difference being that there is more to critique in the Irish case given the long history of involvement with language, nationhood and state-building. Fundamentally as Welsh hints there has been more political rhetoric than government action to champion Irish. Thus we still do not have exact answers to questions such as what is the preferred role of Irish in society. What are the trigger factors which will bring about a more effective language policy? What is the precise nature of the division of labour between the respective government departments with a remit to promote Irish? What are the impediments to the more effective use of Irish in all contexts?

For my part a key structural barrier is the reticence of the civil servants to promote existing policies. A second, acknowledged by most commentators now, is a relative lack of joined up thinking and collective action by the four agencies charged with different aspects of Irish language promotion. There is a need for holistic thinking and collective action in the absence of a national language plan. Note that it is not a question of lack of resources, finance or good ideas; it is rather a lack of sustained, creative innovation within the system. Currently it is unclear what the connection is between such agencies and overall government policy and actions on language promotion. One strategic ini-

tiative would be to consciously appoint professional language planners to state agencies and seek to suture part of such agencies work under the umbrella of a National Language Policy and Planning Centre. A central question which language planners, educational experts and regional development specialist might wish to raise would be what would be the effect on language survival if all the Gaeltacht areas were abolished and more comprehensive measures for language promotion and use were introduced in all parts of the state? Is it taboo to ask such questions?

In his conclusion, Welsh offers a draft outline of the necessary steps for the realisation of a National Plan for Irish, and I would commend his choice of ideas and measures. But I would urge him to go one step further and stimulate a debate within civil society. One practical method of influencing the public discussion is for committed promoters to provide an overview of where we want to be, a set of strategic recommendations which can chart where Irish could/should be in five years or ten years and then benchmark government activity against such a profile. In all such cases within the EU we need active discussion within civil society and in the corridors of power so that we foster a greater sense of deliberative democracy. This is all the more critical following the announcement on the 13th of June 2005 that Irish be made a full official and working language of the EU. At last one can use Irish in Brussels and Strasbourg but what of Ballina and Slievenamon

If sociolinguistic analysis and policy critiques are well worn paths for language voyagers the world of IT where super-machine shall speak to super-machine in any number of programmable languages is a relative mystery for most. The conventional interpretation of the role of lesser use language in IT was shrouded in apprehension, fear, ignorance or suspicion and social conservatives and language pursuits joined forces to decry the impact which the digital age might have on 'minority' language maintenance and diversity. However, **Jeremy Evas's** lively and informed paper has demonstrated three operative principles in this field, namely integration, reconceptualisation and advocacy. Thus there is a corresponding need first for the simultaneous development of terminological, socio-linguistic and technical aspects of language promotion, so that each element becomes mutually reinforcing for maximum impact. Secondly there is an acute need to review our basic conceptions regarding the relationship of lesser used languages, the forces of globalization and the post-modern reality. For as Evas has demonstrated from his own recent experience once corporate organizations such as Microsoft are convinced of the opportunity cost of employing lesser-used languages in their systems, there are few ideological or even commercial reasons not to advance the adoption of targeted languages within the IT sector. Indeed both IT and the digital age may provide the critical innovative spaces needed for linking networks of speakers, offering more choice and the possibility of further empowerment of particular interest groups. Thirdly there is a need for the syncretic and simultaneous marketing of new products and new opportunities, to engage the agencies of the local state to bolster the market potential of lesser used languages by specifying their use in, for example, government procurement requirements

and to use the meso-level government systems in education, in health care delivery, in public administration etc so as to encourage and/ or enforce consumer adoption of the new products. Providing the opportunity is one thing; changing habitual use and behaviour patterns requires exposure and systematic pressure. So much depends on the vision, application and positioning of capable, well intentioned professionals, such as Dr Evas, so as to take advantage of the newer opportunities and to develop the necessary technical infra-structure which translates a titular right into incontestable action. Sound ideas will always circulate, the real difficulty lies in getting them adopted and applied and this is where a pro-active civil service engaged in language policy and promotion is so essential.

Finally throughout this symposium we have been discussing the policy implications of recognising long beleaguered languages and the putative rights of their speakers. This process has evoked a great deal of mistrust and suspicion over the decades. We now need to learn to cope with the responsibility of discharging our new found freedoms, to seize the opportunities afforded through struggle and to build up patterns of trust and empowerment among the various partner agencies that shape the landscape of increasingly plurilingual polities, no less in Canada than in Celtic realms.