



Irish: A story of survival

By Paul Dunne

David Graddol writes in his article, *The Future of Language* [1], “Most linguists agree that roughly 6000 languages exist in the world today. Yet 90% of these may be doomed to extinction, with much of this loss happening in the coming century. This article considers Irish—its history and its future.

The forms for the 2006 Census of population of Ireland were printed in 13 languages and included the question ‘Do you speak Irish?’ Less than 30,000 people speak Irish daily making it third in line to Polish (140,000) and Chinese (40,000) as the most spoken language after English in Ireland. The Irish language (Gaeilge) emerged as a fully structured language during the Celtic period in the Iron Age (600 BC - 400 AD). Ogham stones, pillars with a peculiar style of tick marks writing the names and indicating the burial sites of tribal chiefs, are found today at sites directly associated with Celtic mythology. Irish myths and legends, passed on through verbal re-telling, surely date back even further to the times of Neolithic man (4,000-1500BC), whose presence in Connemara, County Galway is evidenced by stone terraces, pre-bog walls and shell middens.

At an early age I began reading Celtic legends in the Irish language. Lady Augusta Gregory, a benevolent Anglo-Irish landowner, collected spoken Irish fairy tales in the Kiltartan County Galway area and published them in 1902. The legends were written in Kiltartanese, the local English patois. This book, *Irish Myths and Legends*, was incorporated into the Irish primary school system fortunately preserving these stories for the benefit of future generations. An example is the Tain Bo Cuailgne, the hunt for the brown bull of Cooley (Co Louth). Cattle determined wealth in Celtic mythology. The hunt happened because the Ulster tribes captured Queen Maeve of Connaught’s prize bull. The complicated pursuit and re-capture of the bull did no one any good. Disaster dogged everyone even remotely connected with the bull. Legends explain many things including how Fionn MacCumhaill, it looks better written as FinnMcCool, the genial Ulster giant, built a causeway of basalt pillars, which is well-known as the Giant’s Causeway and links Ireland (Eireann) to Scotland (Alban).

Myths and legends aside, the Irish language is institutionalised by legislation including the official designation of the positions Uachtaran (President), Oireachtas (political assembly), Dail (Parliament), Taoiseach (Chief Minister), Tanaiste (Chief adviser-Vice Premier). The Irish army is given orders through Irish. An Irish person has the right to insist on conducting his affairs through Irish. Planning applications for new houses must be written in Irish in Gaeltachts (Irish-speaking areas). Irish trainee primary school teachers and second level school students are required to attend summer school in the Gaeltacht to improve their Irish.

Although Ireland’s place names were anglicised during William Petty’s mapping surveys of Ireland in the 1630s, now-a-days both nomenclatures are present on sign posts: Cnoc na Ri (hill of the King), Dubh Linn (black pool), Droichead Atha (the bridge at the ford), Dun na Gall (the fort of the foreigner), Cu na mara (the hound of the sea), An Daingean (the fort), Baile ns hInse (the townland of the islands), Aras na Naomh (the place of the Saints).

Irish has spread beyond its native borders too. The Irish language is part of Celtic studies courses in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Japan. I engaged in a normal fully comprehensible conversation with Nakinau Yashimoto San of Japan through the medium of Irish in the 1980s. The present Empress of Japan was educated by Irish nuns in her youth and values her early education. I met her when she, then the Crown Princess Michiko, was in Kinvara, Co Galway visiting the convent of the nun’s order that had taught her.

Thus the Irish language has survived repression through time. There is also a clear nationalistic feeling of being Irish as evidenced by 2 million people attending the St. Patrick’s Day Parade in New York on 17th March this year. The future of the language though is uncertain. Government institutions spend money promoting the language but this has not reversed its decline; proliferation of English seems inevitable.

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References:

1. Graddol D. *The Future of Language*. *Science* 2004;303:1329-31
2. Schoenberg U. Codes, quips and sayings-they’re all in the family. *The Write Stuff* 2006;15:22

Ursula Schoeneberg in her article in the March issue of TWS this year [2] wrote that the etymology of ‘What a bunch of malarkey’ remains in the dark. This expression is a direct translation of ‘Ta sin lan de mallarta’ [Sic.], (there is no ‘k’ in the Irish language) and translates to ‘That is a load of rubbish’ in English. Mallarta means rubbish and implies something is untrustworthy. A number of Irish words have infiltrated the English language, e.g. prizes galore comes from an Irish word (go leor) meaning plenty, smithereens from one (smitirini) meaning broken in small pieces, and whiskey (uisce beatha) means water of life in Irish. ‘Boycott’ also has its roots in Ireland. Charles Boycott was an English land agent in Ireland who was ostracized in 1880 for refusing to reduce rents.