



**Ollscoil  
Mhá Nuad**  
Ollscoil na hÉireann  
Má Nuad

# **‘She speaks fluent Irish’:**

## **some challenges encountered in minority-language testing**

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# Overview

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- What is a minority language?
- Profile of a minority language
- Anatomy of a minority language: Irish
- Issues for learners/test takers?
- What is plurilingualism?
- Native speaker competence?
- The tyranny of the native speaker?
- Questions

# Definition of a minority language

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## ❑ Article 1 – Definitions

*For the purposes of this Charter:*

*"regional or minority languages" means **languages that are:***

- (i) **traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population; and***
- (ii) **different from the official language(s) of that State;***

*it does not include either dialects of the official language(s) of the State or the languages of migrants;*

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, Strasbourg

## ❑ Many other definitions

# Profile of a minority language

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- ❑ *The demographic situation of such regional or minority languages varies greatly, from a few thousand speakers to several million, and so does the law and practice of the individual States with respect to them. However, what many have in common is a greater or lesser degree of precariousness. Moreover, {...} nowadays the threats facing these regional or minority languages are often due at least as much to the inevitably standardising influence of modern civilisation and especially of the mass media as to an unfriendly environment or a government policy of assimilation.*

Explanatory Report to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages,  
Strasbourg, 5.11.92.

- ❑ Most of today's European languages are, to some extent, subject to this standardising influence of modern civilisation and the mass media (globalisation), and in many cases, if not all, this standardising influence takes the form of English.

# Profile of a minority language

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- ❑ All languages share features typically associated with minority languages
  
- ❑ Every language is a minority language somewhere

# Anatomy of a minority language: Irish

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- ❑ Ireland is a multilingual country: 212 languages used daily (Census 2016)
- ❑ Irish, which belongs to a different language family to English, remains one of these languages.
- ❑ Despite centuries of predicting the demise of the language, crucially, the last native speaker of Irish has not yet been born.
- ❑ Over the centuries, the ways and contexts in which we use Irish have changed as society itself changes.

# Anatomy of a minority language: Irish

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- ❑ Irish belongs to the Celtic branch of Indo-European languages, the other Celtic languages being Scots Gaelic, Manx, Welsh, Breton and Cornish.
- ❑ The earliest inscriptions in Ogham date from 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC: Irish is the oldest written language in Europe still used as a vernacular
- ❑ Following the English conquest there was a gradual policy-driven shift towards the English language.
- ❑ Article 8 of the 1937 Constitution states “The Irish language as the national language is the first official language. The English language is recognised as the second official language.”
- ❑ Irish state language policy: “the maintenance of the Irish-speaking community in the Gaeltacht; the promotion/revival of Irish in the overwhelmingly English-speaking country, through the education system (acquisition planning); ensuring basic competence in Irish on the part of those working in the public service (status planning), and standardizing and modernizing the language itself (corpus planning)”

# Celtic countries

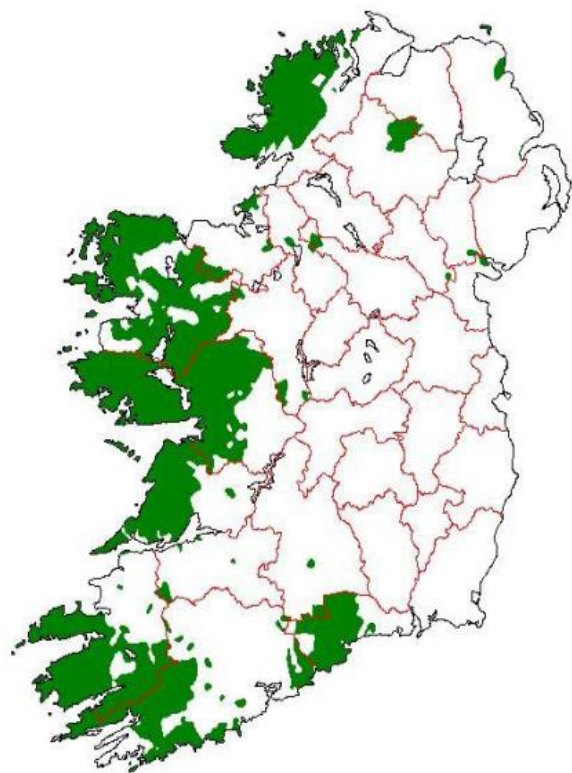
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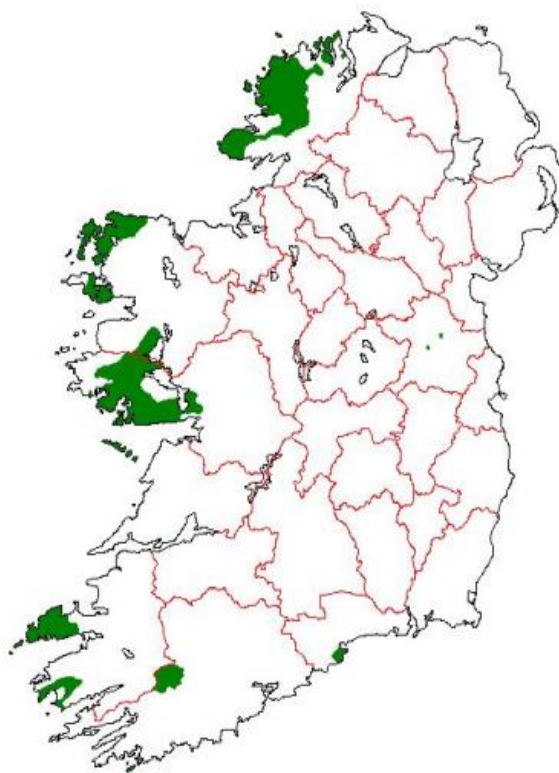


# Language decline

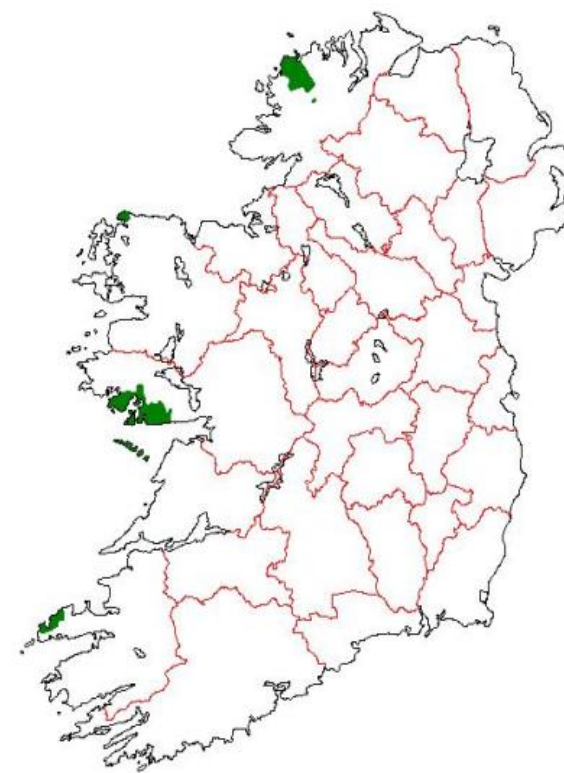
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1926



1956



2007



An Roinn  
Cultúir, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta  
Department of  
Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

# Irish today

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- ❑ The study of Irish is compulsory throughout the school-going period – from 4 to 18 years.
- ❑ A thriving Irish-medium school system
- ❑ Total number of persons (aged 3 and over) who can speak Irish: 1,761,420, (39.8%). 418,420 never spoke it, 558,608 indicated they only spoke it within the education system.
- ❑ Of the remaining group, 586,535 persons indicated they spoke Irish less often than weekly, 111,473 spoke weekly while just 73,803 persons spoke Irish daily.
- ❑ Daily Irish speakers tended to be better educated than the general population with 49 per cent holding a third level degree or higher compared with just 28.5 per cent for the population generally.
- ❑ So the first official language of Ireland is spoken on a daily basis by only a small minority of the population.
- ❑ The language struggles in a country, even a world, dominated by the second national language, English.

# Issues for learners/test takers

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- ❑ Irish is almost excluded from certain language domains: science, technology and business
- ❑ Many native speakers have difficulty writing the language
- ❑ Rote learning is a feature of the education system
- ❑ Learner knowledge is often limited to the receptive skills (Gaelic chú an mhinisteir)
- ❑ Speakers from total immersion programmes often use what is sometimes called ‘immersion-speak’, a variety of the language heavily calqued on English
- ❑ Use of English in place of neologisms
- ❑ Decline in reading is a general problem

# Ideal of native speaker competence

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- ❑ Past: ultimate goal should be to produce linguists with 'educated native speaker' competence.
- ❑ The term 'ideal native speaker' was also used
- ❑ Many different definitions of what 'native speaker' is (Davies et al.)
- ❑ Different views of what this should be in different countries. Déon 'il parle le français avec une richesse argotique qui éblouit' (Pages grecques)
- ❑ Minority languages: Because of the often strong links between minority languages and identity, there is less tolerance for that which is exogenous.

# CEFR

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- The 'Can do' definitions go some way to departing from this. Proficiency rather than deficiency
- CEFR is not a standardization tool (CV)
- The co-construction of meaning (CV)

# Tyranny of native speaker competence

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- ❑ Balanced bilinguals, if they exist, are very rare
- ❑ Idealisation of the native speaker as the purest embodiment of the language runs counter to the very principle of plurilingualism, in which interference from other languages forms an important part of the speaker's repertoire.
- ❑ After all, this kind of plurilingualism (polylingualism) has enriched all our languages and continues to do so, perhaps even at a more accelerated rate than heretofore, thanks to the communication revolution.
- ❑ Perhaps the kind of ideal native speaker that we are aiming to produce, or to be, is based on a view that monolingualism is the ideal, that our desire is to produce monolingual speakers of one or more languages.

# Plurilingualism

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- ❑ He or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. In different situations, a person can call flexibly upon different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor. (CEFR p.4)
- ❑ In a way, plurilingualism, which relies on a repertoire of different languages for communication, is not entirely different from the notion of calque
- ❑ *...one's own language is never a single language: in it there are always survivals of the past and a potential for other-languagedness" (ibid., 66). This diversity, which is always both already present and possible in language, "achieves its full creative consciousness only under conditions of an active polyglossia" ; (at that point) two myths perish simultaneously: the myth of a language that presumes to be the only language, and the myth of a language that presumes to be completely unified" Poleczi quoting Bahktin*

## To sum up...

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There is population out there of speakers, who are able to perform in the L2 in a professional or social situation at a relatively high level, having recourse to their language repertoire, but whose linguistic performances would not meet criteria laid down in most formal language tests.



# Questions

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- If there is no such thing as a pure language, should we therefore not produce a kind of test which acknowledges those who have learned the language in a professional or social context, who can communicate fluently and effectively but not academically, with limited grammatical accuracy, and non-native accent?
- In an age where democratisation of the media is a fact of life and lower registers are to be heard constantly, is our kind of language testing out of date?
- In an era of perennial migration, is the notion of the ideal speaker not unacceptable?
- In the case of minority languages, is it time to encourage more learners by acknowledging different kinds of speakers?
- Is it time for a new kind of language test for a globalised, post-literate age?

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Hvala vam!

Go raibh maith agaibh!

Thank you!

