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## Protecting Endangered Languages: The Case of Irish

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### Abstract

*This article reviews the Irish experience of plurilingual aspiration from three perspectives. It first relates the case for preserving and learning the Irish language to Ireland's cultural development as an independent nation, as distinct from its struggles for political freedom and economic self-determination. It next considers the broader context of the value of learning or knowing a second language. It then considers Irish secondary schoolgoers' critical attitudes to the learning of Irish and to government policy on the learning of the Irish language. It concludes that it is wrong to consider global vehicular languages such as English and cultural languages such as Irish as competing for single-language dominance. Instead, there should be an early initiation into multiple language systems, deepening people's linguistic diversity and plurilingual competence. This should be combined with a content-based integrated approach concentrating on cultural value, history, and literature. Languages should be seen as vectors of continuity and of connection with a specific identity, a specific past and a specific place. Ultimately, as English becomes increasingly and even exclusively vehicular, 'non-global' languages like Irish will be valued as embodying community and relational values, and as channels serving people's inter-communication, connectedness and development – at deeper levels than the physical, political and economic.*

*Keywords: Linguistics; Second language acquisition; Culture; Development; Knowledge--Philosophy; Irish*

### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to sketch some of the principal conclusions that can be drawn from the Irish experience of plurilingual aspiration, more specifically from the implementation of the official bilingual policy of the Irish state. An abundant literature exists, both scholarly

(i.e. scientific and descriptive) and also philosophical and political, even normative, on the attempt to restore and protect the Irish language by establishing both Irish and English as the two official languages of Ireland. Rather than presenting a review of that literature, this study provides three separate perspectives on the subject.<sup>1</sup> In the first section, the issue of preserving and learning the Irish language is discussed from physical, political, economic, social, cultural, and emotional points of view using a foundation of nomology model. This is followed by an analysis of the value of learning or knowing Irish within the broader context both of *plurilingualism* in general and of the Irish *education system* in particular. In the third section, which connects with both preceding parts, a survey on pupils' own attitudes to the learning of Irish in Irish secondary schools are interpreted as showing how government policy on the learning of the Irish language by schoolgoers is perceived by the young learners themselves.

## Second Languages: A Developmental Necessity

While every country is different, the challenges, and also opportunities associated with a social world joined up by information technology affect us all. Throughout the world, languages are dying out, being lost forever. The statistics show that there are between 6,000 and 7,000 languages spoken as of 2010<sup>2</sup> and that between 50–90% of those will have become extinct by the year 2100.<sup>3</sup> This raises questions such as why have a second, or third language? When will this decline stop, if ever? Whither the future of second, maybe better to say alternative languages? Should we try to stop this decline, before the world has been reduced to English (everywhere, almost) and to some other more regionally than globally dominant vehicular languages such as Mandarin, Hindustani and Spanish, to the detriment even of languages such as Russian, Arabic, Bengali, Portuguese and French? Which way to stem the tide of decline? Who cares? Where will alternative languages be spoken: in the home, schools? And what is the point of having alternative languages?

It may not be easy to answer these questions as many factors impact the way languages are being used, becoming endangered or dying out, particularly in the process of globalisation and neo-colonialism where the economically powerful languages dominate other languages<sup>4</sup>. Across the world, many countries have enacted specific legislation to protect and stabilise endangered languages, of which Irish is a good example.

Irish belongs to the Gaelic or Goidelic branch of the Celtic languages, along with Scottish Gaelic and Manx. By the Middle Ages Irish was the primary means of communication between people on the island.<sup>5</sup> However, from the period of the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland onwards there were significant linguistic and cultural shifts as speakers of Norman French and later Old English settled in Ireland.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, Gaelic maintained its status as the most commonly used vernacular in Ireland until the 1600s, when British control

<sup>1</sup> The three sections have been authored separately: Section I by Cathal Brugha, Section II by Mary Gallagher and Section III by Lan Li. Since the three sections are authored separately, and since the last part includes a significant number of unedited and anonymous views from an attitudinal survey, the article enacts – or at least does not disguise or bury – the resistant and even contradictory complexity of the subject. The authors are grateful to the survey respondents for their input.

<sup>2</sup> Moseley, Christopher. (ed.). (2010). *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. Memory of Peoples* (3rd ed.). Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

<sup>3</sup> Austin, Peter K; Sallabank, Julia (2011). 'Introduction'. In Austin, Peter K; Sallabank, Julia. *Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Austin and Sallabank. (2011). 'Introduction'.

<sup>5</sup> McDermott, Philip (2011). "'Irish isn't spoken here?'" Language policy and planning in Ireland'. *English Today*. 106. Vol. 27. No. 2. June 2011, 25-6.

<sup>6</sup> Cronin, M. (1996). *Translating Ireland*. Cork: Cork University Press; ÓLaoire, M. 2005. 'The language planning situation in Ireland.' *Current Issues in Language Planning*. 6(3), 255.

strengthened, particularly during and after a series of plantations from Britain throughout the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> By the nineteenth century Irish was still commonly used, but was no longer a language of political, social or economic power, a role now held by English. This was in part due to a series of imperialist policies implemented by the British government of the time, which served to solidify the role of English as dominant within Irish society.<sup>8</sup> In the early part of the twentieth century, Irish was spoken by less than 18% of the population.<sup>9</sup>

After Ireland received international recognition as an independent nation in 1921, the Irish language was designated the ‘national language’ in the Constitution and a compulsory subject on the school curriculum. Competence in Irish became necessary for employment in the public service. In 1937, a revised Constitution designated Irish as ‘the first official language’ because it is ‘the national language’, while English was recognised as ‘a second official language’.<sup>10</sup>

However, the number of Irish speakers continued to decline and, in 2017, Irish continues to be a native language mainly in the remoter western extremities of Ireland.<sup>11</sup> Although the Irish language has been taught in government-funded schools in the Republic of Ireland since the early days of the state, the overall success of the government’s language policy is highly debatable. Irish is not the living language for people’s daily communication in the most areas of the country. Results from the 2006 government census indicate that over 1.6 million, from a population of 4.2 million, had communicational ability in Irish. Of those, 0.4 million used the language within the education system, but at no other time. An additional 0.67 million stated that they knew the language but used it only on a weekly basis or less. A further 0.4 million, despite claiming knowledge of the language, did not use it at all, while 84,000 used the language daily, with approximately 31,000 of these being of school-going age.<sup>12</sup>

This situation has given rise to much debate about how the Irish language should be protected. The abolition of compulsory Irish for the Leaving Certificate has been a policy advocated twice by Fine Gael, a major Irish party which won power in the 2011 general election as part of a coalition with the Labour Party. More than 1,000 teenage students in fifth and sixth year were questioned in the National Student Centenary Survey, which was carried out in the first half of 2016, with the results showing that over a third (39%) believed that Irish should not be a compulsory subject. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) distinguishes between five levels of language endangerment: ‘safe’, ‘vulnerable’ (not spoken by children outside the home), ‘definitely endangered’ (not spoken by children), ‘severely endangered’ (only spoken by the oldest generations), and ‘critically endangered’ (spoken by few members of the oldest generation, often semi-speakers).<sup>13</sup> By these criteria, the Irish language is potentially endangered.

However, both the Irish government and Irish individuals would seem to have every reason to wish to maintain the language. To better understand why this is so, a theoretical

<sup>7</sup> Hindley, R. (1990). *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary*. London: Routledge.

<sup>8</sup> McDermott, (2011). ‘Irish isn’t spoken here?’, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Riagáin, Pádraig Ó. (1997). *Language policy and social reproduction: Ireland 1893-1993*. Gloucestershire: Clarendon Press.

<sup>10</sup> McDermott, (2011). ‘Irish isn’t spoken here?’, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Watson, I. (1996). ‘The Irish language and television: national identity, preservation, restoration and minority rights.’ *British Journal of Sociology*. pp. 255-274.

<sup>12</sup> McDermott, (2011). ‘Irish isn’t spoken here?’ 27.

<sup>13</sup> Moseley, Christopher, ed. (2010). *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger. Memory of Peoples* (3rd ed.). Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

model, the foundation of nomology,<sup>14</sup> is applied in this section. Using this model, the incentives for the protection of the Irish Language will be discussed from physical, political, economic, social and cultural, points of view. We will consider how these various factors, and the relationships between them, inform the second language debate.

Compelling evidence on the physical level has been emerging recently showing the beneficial effect of bilingualism on children's cognitive development, on cognition in adulthood and more especially in older age. It appears that bilingualism protects against cognitive decline via a process known as 'cognitive reserve', associated with a delay in the onset of symptoms of dementia.<sup>15</sup> How this effect is produced is the subject of ongoing research, but appears to relate to the functioning of the mind. Apparently, as Bialystok argued, 'bilingual individuals consistently outperform their monolingual counterparts on tasks involving executive control'.<sup>16</sup> The possible protective effect against Alzheimer's disease may relate to the effect of bilingualism on cognitive organisation.<sup>17</sup> Apparently, with bilingual speakers, both languages are constantly active to some degree, even in strongly monolingual contexts. Bilingualism seems to enhance people's executive control system, which is known to have broader cognitive benefits, such as in situations of conflict resolution.<sup>18</sup> From this point of view, Irish children learning two or more languages at a young age, and continuing to use them actively, would benefit their brain development and cognitive ability, though this benefit may not be widely recognised either by government policy makers or the general public.

As a language closely associated with resistance to colonialism and neo-colonialism, the political aspect of the Irish language has been discussed for a long time, has caused controversy, and is particularly topical as Ireland has recently been celebrating the centenary of its 1916 rebellion against British rule, a revolt that successfully led to Ireland's independence. For seven centuries Britain used Ireland as a 'physical' resource for its empire, providing food, raw materials (including wood for its ships and to fuel the industrial revolution), and soldiers for its armies. When the population size grew beyond Britain's needs, measures were taken, or helped, to bring it down.<sup>19</sup> Between 1840 and 1900 the population of Ireland was reduced by half.<sup>20</sup> Britain used not just poverty, starvation or famine and forced emigration but also oppression and denial of rights to achieve its purposes. For example, a high proportion of British soldiers were Irish who had joined because it was the only job open to them. It was thus very common for Irish people to find themselves on both sides in a war, having joined opposite sides for very different reasons.

Part of the policy of confining Irish people to a purely physical role (in the enablement of empire) included denying them full political rights, economic opportunities and culture, particularly education. Teaching Irish history and use of the Irish language in schools was forbidden or punished. Even the term 'Irish language' was replaced by *Gaelic* (from *Gaeilge* the word for the language in Irish), implying it belonged to a minority 'tribe' of poor, ignorant,

<sup>14</sup> Brugha, C. M. (2015). 'Foundation of Nomology.' *European Journal of Operational Research*, 240 (3). pp. 734-747.

<sup>15</sup> Bialystok, E., Craik, F. I., & Luk, G. (2012). 'Bilingualism: consequences for mind and brain'. *Trends in cognitive sciences*. 16 (4). pp. 240-250.

<sup>16</sup> Bialystok, E. (2011). 'Reshaping the mind: the benefits of bilingualism'. *Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology/Revue canadienne de psychologie expérimentale*. 65 (4), 229.

<sup>17</sup> Marian, V. and Shook, A. (2012). 'The cognitive benefits of being bilingual'. Paper presented at the Cerebrum: the Dana forum on brain science.

<sup>18</sup> Costa, A., Hernández, M. and Sebastián-Gallés, N. (2008). 'Bilingualism aids conflict resolution: Evidence from the ANT task'. *Cognition*. 106 (1). pp. 59-86.

<sup>19</sup> Ó. Gráda, C. (2009). *Famine: a short history*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>20</sup> Mokyr, J., & Ó. Gráda, C. (1984). 'New Developments in Irish Population History, 1700-1850'. *The Economic History Review*. 37 (4). pp. 473-488.

uneducated country people on the western seaboard. Consequently, when people left school, changed contexts, and began to question their attitudes, they contrasted their physical existence with their lack of cultural expression. Confusion about what life was about was replaced by a realisation that the Irish were in a depressed condition. Physical poverty extended to the soul. This physical-cultural contrast led to people learning about what had been denied to them, from which came an interest in the Irish language and culture. This became the main well-spring for the movement to seek Irish freedom. Many of the movement's leaders changed from speaking English to Irish, changed their names from English versions to Irish.<sup>21</sup> An interesting correlative for the depression argument is that many of the people who made such a change, not just then but over the centuries of British rule, did not come from purely native Irish backgrounds. In many cases one of the parents was English, or the family had an Anglo-Irish background. Throughout the period from 1890 onwards, leading up to the War of Independence, the Irish language became the symbol of freedom, summed up in the 'Ireland, not free merely but Gaelic as well; not Gaelic merely, but free as well'.<sup>22</sup> This double aspiration (to political freedom and to cultural identity and integrity) has continued into the recent phase of resistance to British rule in Northern Ireland.<sup>23</sup> It is also reflected in other post-colonial contexts such as the French-speaking province of Quebec in Canada.<sup>24</sup>

Some would argue that there is no reason to have a second different language now that there is no formal political dispute between Ireland and Britain. This view is not shared, however, by Irish speakers, including those who speak it only on an occasional basis. Also, there is evidence that minority communities within countries have always seen the benefits of 'alternative' languages as a form of 'political' defence or protection. For the past four centuries Shelta, also known as Cant or Gammon, has been used in Ireland by the 'travelling community': people whose lifestyle consists in not settling in one particular area. 'It serves as a secret language in the sense that few people, other than its speakers, know of its existence. Travellers can use the language freely in the presence of the settled community.'<sup>25</sup> Recently Ireland has become multi-ethnic, with the share of foreign-born persons living in Ireland rising from 6 percent in 1991 to almost 15 percent in 2006 (with some recent decline due to a recession)<sup>26</sup> This appears to be softening attitudes against multilingualism.<sup>27</sup> But, as yet, there hasn't been an appreciable change in attitudes to Irish amongst non-speakers.<sup>28</sup>

In Ireland, the 1919-21 War of Independence was not entirely successful, and Britain reasserted its interests in Ireland leading to a civil war in 1922-23. The battle-ground between

<sup>21</sup> Pierce, David. "Cultural Nationalism and the Irish Literary Revival." *International Journal of English Studies* 2, no. 2 (2002): 1-22.

<sup>22</sup> Pearse, Padraic. *Political writings and speeches*. Talbot Press, 1952.

<sup>23</sup> Kachuk, P. (1994). 'A resistance to British cultural hegemony: Irish-language activism in west Belfast'. *Anthropologica*, pp. 135-154.

<sup>24</sup> Howard, R. E. (1991). 'The national question in Canada: quebec'. *Human Rights Quarterly*. 13 (3). pp. 412-419.

<sup>25</sup> Nic Craith, Máiréad. (2001). 'Cultural diversity in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement'. *Revised version of a paper presented at a seminar organised by the Institute for British-Irish Studies and the Department of Politics, University College Dublin, 20 October 2000*. University College Dublin. Institute for British-Irish Studies.

<sup>26</sup> Ruhs, Martin and Quinn, Emma. (2009). 'Ireland: From rapid immigration to recession'. *Migration Information Source*: 1-12, published at <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/ireland-rapid-immigration-recession>. (accessed on 24 July, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Edwards, V.(2008). *Multilingualism in the English-speaking world: Pedigree of nations*. Vol. 5. John Wiley & Sons.

<sup>28</sup> Coady, M. R. (2001). 'Attitudes toward bilingualism in Ireland'. *Bilingual Research Journal*. 25.1-2. pp. 39-58; Darmody, Merike and Daly, T. (2015). 'Attitudes towards the Irish Language on the Island of Ireland'. *Dublin: ESRI*.

the Irish nation and the Anglo-Irish, or more accurately those who acquiesced to British influence, became centred on a politicised campaign to ‘restore Irish’.<sup>29</sup> The new Irish governments tried to change from an English- to an Irish-speaking public. Poor teaching methods slowed the spread of Irish to the non-Irish-speaking population.<sup>30</sup> In the uncertainty about the future of Irish, one suggested response was to assert language political rights for the Irish-speaking minority, by providing them with their own television and radio services.<sup>31</sup> A similar political approach is promoted in Canada: namely the provision of ‘cultural autonomy’ in order to develop the ‘wellness of language minorities’.<sup>32</sup>

Language policy in the European Union focuses on a political approach, protecting language rights both of member countries and of population minorities.<sup>33</sup> European policy has caused some difficulties in Ireland, where Irish is its first official language, but is spoken only by a minority, and so was covered by neither policy. Europe also tries to promote the idea of Europeans having two languages in addition to their ‘heritage language’. This ‘mother tongue +2’ policy is seen as a way of bringing Europeans together.<sup>34</sup> The Irish experience is that political approaches alone do not necessarily encourage people to learn second, or native, or minority languages. When people are politically free they need a more compelling motivation to foster a second language, even if it is native to their culture.

The most obvious case for the rapid global spread of English, and for the decline and disappearance of thousands of minority languages, is economic. Now that anyone on the planet can communicate with almost anyone else no matter where they are, it makes sense for them to have a *lingua franca* to facilitate trade and the exchange of services. To a small extent, economic motivations have also developed the spread of Irish, in that proficiency in the language is required for appointment to civil service positions in Ireland, because it is asserted that the public have the right to be spoken to in the state’s first official language.<sup>35</sup> This means that competence in Irish can still offer employment opportunities (in teaching, translation, administration etc.). Despite this state of affairs, the economic motive is unlikely to help the spread of the language into the future, and is probably more likely to reinforce instead the rise of the globally dominant *lingua franca* (English).<sup>36</sup>

Justifications concerning the future relevance of minority or ‘mother tongues’ are likely to be connected with the development of attitudes socially, and with the connection between personal or psychological growth on an individual level with that of communities. The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis holds that language ‘plays a powerful role in shaping human consciousness, affecting everything from private thought and perception to larger patterns of behaviour in society – ultimately allowing members of any given speech community to arrive at a shared sense of social reality’.<sup>37</sup> This theory suggests firstly, that ‘structural differences between language systems will, in general, be paralleled by non-linguistic cognitive

<sup>29</sup> Greene, D. H. (1957). ‘Synge and the Irish’. *Colby Quarterly*. 4 (9), 4.

<sup>30</sup> Kennedy, I. A. (2012). *Irish Medium Education: Cognitive Skills, Linguistic Skills, and Attitudes Towards Irish*. Bangor University.

<sup>31</sup> Watson, I. (1996). ‘The Irish language and television: national identity, preservation, restoration and minority rights’. *British Journal of Sociology*. pp. 255-274.

<sup>32</sup> Bourhis, R. Y. and Landry, R. (2012). ‘Group vitality, cultural autonomy and the wellness of language minorities’. *Decline and prospects of the English-speaking communities of Quebec*. pp. 23-69.

<sup>33</sup> Grin, F. (2004). Book review on Robert Phillipson’s book *English-Only Europe? Challenging Language Policy*. *Language Policy*. 3 (1). pp. 67-71.

<sup>34</sup> Knechtelsdorfer, E. (2013). *Monolingual multilingualism?* Doctoral dissertation, University of Vienna.

<sup>35</sup> This aspiration is currently being reduced to a target of 6% of state employees.

<sup>36</sup> Crawford, James. "Seven Hypotheses on Language Loss Causes and Cures." (1996).

<sup>37</sup> O’Neill, S. P. (2015). ‘Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis’. *The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

differences, of an unspecified sort, in the native speakers of the two languages', and that 'the structure of anyone's native language strongly influences or fully determines the world-view he will acquire as he learns the language'.<sup>38</sup> This view comes from Brown and Lenneberg's study in language and cognition.<sup>39</sup>

What does this theory mean for the future of communities, countries and nations? English is the most spoken language in the world, with the most rapidly growing group of users – many of whom acquire it as a second language. The spread of English is increasing because of the internet, academic publishing, and the globalisation of politics and economics. English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) is now the subject of widespread research in various disciplines.<sup>40</sup> We can therefore take the case of the global spread of English as a given, despite some continuing scepticism.<sup>41</sup> Having a global *lingua franca* may ultimately lead to a single world-view. This would be entirely congruent with the imperative of a politically and economically functional, joined-up world. If countries and regions with their own socio-cultural traditions and world views, wish to maintain their national identities, it makes sense to use language to protect their values. Ireland is a case in point. The benign assumption was imperialism brought civilisation to the ignorant. But centuries before the British invaded, Ireland had been sending educators to Europe.<sup>42</sup> The cultural clean-slate argument is a reductive political one. The reality is that people learn in cultural communities. This education involves exploring feelings, using language and developing attitudes, and this is a cultural process involving music, story, song and folklore.

The implication of the foregoing is that culture provides a basis for developing value systems, and for embodying the aspirations of countries and nations. Further implications follow. If a global *lingua franca* will be seen as politically and economically necessary in the future, having a mother tongue will be seen as important for people's education and growth, namely to serve cultural purposes, such as bonding, uniting and helping people to articulate their distinctive feelings and values,<sup>43</sup> and will be justified with reference to the social benefits of multiculturalism<sup>44</sup>.

For many people, probably a majority, a culturally homogenous life confined to the physical, political and economic levels may be perfectly fulfilling. So, an interest in knowing and speaking 'their native language' will be unimportant for them. The consequence of this turning away from the value of cultural identity, identification and continuity is that the 'native language' will no longer be a local *lingua franca*, but will serve mainly for cultural and educational purposes. An emerging phenomenon is of non-native Irish-speakers wishing to learn Irish for the sake of the values and attitudes it conveys, the variety and richness of its culture, and the links to literature, learning and tradition. Irish scholarship is growing in universities in Europe, the United States, and Canada. This emerging phenomenon is facilitated

<sup>38</sup> Kay, P. and Kempton, W. (1984). 'What is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis?' *American anthropologist*. 86 (1). pp. 65-79.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, R. W. & Lenneberg, E. H. (1954). 'A study in language and cognition'. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. 49 (3). 454.

<sup>40</sup> Jenkins, Jennifer, Cogo, Alessia, and Dewey, Martin. (2011). 'Review of developments in research into English as a lingua franca'. *Language Teaching*. Vol. 44. No. 3. pp. 281-315.

<sup>41</sup> Ostler, Nicholas. (2010). *The last lingua franca: English until the return of Babel*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

<sup>42</sup> Richter, Michael. (2002). 'St. Gallen and the Irish in the early Middle Ages.' in Michael Richter and Jean-Michel Picard, (ed.). *Ogma: Essays in Celtic Studies in Honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin*, Dublin: Four Courts. pp. 65-75.

<sup>43</sup> Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>44</sup> Chaplin, J. (2008). 'Beyond Multiculturalism - But to where? Public Justice and Cultural Diversity'. *Philosophia Reformata*. 73. 2:190.



by information technology such as Duolingo, which currently has about two million people world-wide learning the Irish language.<sup>45</sup>

To sum up, the Irish language is not a typical second language, because of the colonial history of attempts to replace it with English, which happens to have become the globally dominant and most economically powerful language on the planet. This history led to the Irish language becoming central to the independence movement more than a century ago, which in turn resulted in the language being associated with the political establishment of the new state and the latter's use of the education system to 'force' people to learn a language that, in the long run, was to have mainly cultural value. Poor teaching, and possibly compulsion, led to a resistance to Irish. Yet despite the failure of government policy, the language is now seeing a revival as what we might call a 'language of culture'. The simplistic solution proposed by those arguing against Irish is to abolish it as a compulsory subject in school. However, as we shall see in the next section of this article, abolition could cause the language's terminal decline.

## II. The Educational Value of Learning or Knowing Irish

Of the many challenges facing third-level education in Ireland, the core issue of academic aspiration or ambition risks going unnoticed in all the excessively mediated anxiety about other concerns, principally funding and global market share. Several obstacles appear to stand in the way of the raising of Irish educational ambition, but three global trends stand out and affect all levels of educational aspiration and attainment in Ireland's second-level and primary education. These obstacles are: first, the spread of an obsession with assessment at the expense of rationale/motivation: this means that the 'how' and 'how well' of learning too often trump the far more important 'what' and 'why'; second, the predominance of a competitive, market-driven homogenisation (a *linguistic and cultural homogenisation*) of what is taught/learned across the world; and third, the neglect of transmission, more especially the *downgrading of linguistic and cultural transmission*. All three trends can be seen to be linked to what has been explored in the first section of this article as the perceived value – or lack of value – associated with learning Irish. None of these obstacles to Irish educational ambition, however, and especially not the third one, can be regarded as educational concerns exclusively. Indeed, the wider anthropological implications of the non-transmission of linguistic diversity are particularly obvious. They include incalculable losses in relation to the cultural capital of humanity: to repeat a point made in the first part of this article, authored by Gallagher, it is estimated that, while about 7,000 languages are spoken today, six die each year, meaning that about 400 have become extinct since 1950.<sup>46</sup>

It is, however, the specifically educational value of protecting linguistic diversity that concerns us here. There has been some suggestion in recent years of falling educational standards in Ireland, although this suggestion refers exclusively to the second- and third-level systems.<sup>47</sup> It is certainly true that putting universities in different countries or continents into global, monoglot (Anglophone) competition for market share, far from raising educational quality and academic standards, is highly problematic and may actually threaten educational quality, at least as far as literacy (a classic worldwide marker of, or proxy for, educational

<sup>45</sup> Jones, A. (2015). "Mobile Informal Language Learning: Exploring Welsh Learners' Practices". *ELearning Papers* (45).

<sup>46</sup> See the digital project entitled *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. On the future and the value of linguistic diversity see Bellos, David. (2011). *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? The Amazing Adventure of Translation* London: Allen Lane.

<sup>47</sup> See Foley, Greg. (2012). *The Education Conundrum* (e-book on Smashwords); Gallagher, Mary. (2012). *Academic Armageddon*. Dublin: The Liffey Press; Walsh, Brendan. (2012). *Degrees of Nonsense: the Demise of the University in Ireland*. Dublin: Glasnevin Press.

attainment) is concerned. Such global competition necessarily threatens real inter-cultural literacy, which can only be encouraged and enhanced by multilingual investment. It also works against the way universities (especially in the non-Anglophone world) traditionally serve to connect people and places – not just with other people and other places, but also with memory, identity and meaning.

This neo-liberal trend, towards ever-more globalised universities working in a ‘Globish’ vernacular, demonstrably results in the downgrading of languages other than global ones such as English. In addition, however (and somewhat paradoxically), the political and economic hegemony of global English, while it contributes to a dominance from which Ireland derives a distinct market advantage in the Higher Education business, seems to be masking decreasing levels of English-language literacy, a trend that can be seen throughout the (higher) education systems of the traditionally English-speaking world, even as the hegemony of English (or Globish) encourages in these countries an ever-more entrenched and narrowing, monolingual complacency. This is the only reasonable conclusion that can be drawn from the most recent measurements published by the Organization for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) in January 2016,<sup>48</sup> which positively confirm the extent of the problem with low English-language literacy among sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds in England, Northern Ireland and Ireland: the measured level in England was the lowest of all twenty-three developed countries participating in the survey (Scotland and Wales did not take part).

The most important implication of these results is that, far from having a negative effect on first-language literacy, speaking or learning other languages or even just one other language (whether Global English - often disparagingly called Globish - or Spanish, or even Irish) seems to be linked to better first-language literacy outcomes. It can hardly be a coincidence that the three lowest-ranked jurisdictions for first-language literacy (in English) are all Anglophone countries with a poor record in the promotion of plurilingual competence. It may not be a coincidence either that it is Ireland (with its two official languages) that boasts the highest ranked of the three lowest-performing Anglophone cohorts. To those not steeped in the world of language learning, this interpretation of the OECD data might seem counter-intuitive. It might appear strange that literacy levels would be higher amongst those who have been obliged to become literate in more than one language, Japanese, Norwegian or English, for example. In fact, it would appear that sensitisation to more than one linguistic system favours higher literacy levels.

In the wider Anglophone world, but particularly in England, there appears to be a resolute and well-documented lack of wholehearted political and economic support towards second- and third-level provision of education in ‘other’ languages and literatures. Certainly, closures and shrinkages of language departments across the Anglo-Global world, but more particularly in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, are, if anything, accelerating as the third-level system expands.<sup>49</sup> The consequence of this contraction at third level is a reduction in the number of language teachers being trained up.

Concerning the cause of this contraction, which is widely seen as reflecting the UK (New Labour) policy decision in 2004 to scrap the compulsory study of one ‘other’ language up to age 16,<sup>50</sup> the most likely reason is that plurilingualism is not, or at least does not appear

<sup>48</sup> See the entire report on the OECD website:

[http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Skills\\_Matter\\_Further\\_Results\\_from\\_the\\_Survey\\_of\\_Adult\\_Skills.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Skills_Matter_Further_Results_from_the_Survey_of_Adult_Skills.pdf) (accessed on 9 July, 2017).

<sup>49</sup> ‘[...] the UK is in the throes of a huge linguistic slump’, Anna Bawden. (8<sup>th</sup> October, 2013). ‘Modern Languages: Degree Courses in Freefall’. *The Guardian*.

<sup>50</sup> In 2013, only 44% of 16-year olds in the UK were studying another language.

to be, economical. While this is never explicitly stated, the UK system, at least in England and Wales, seems to regard as economically *unviable* both the time and the resource investment required in order to develop top-level linguistic and cultural competence in students. What economically-focussed administrations may be rejecting above all, however, is the *uncomfortable fact* that the deceptions of grade inflation are quite unsustainable in language studies: a graduate can either speak, understand, read and write the language in which they are graduating to a certain level, or they cannot. Naturally, high numbers of students graduating with *realistic grades* in languages are not good for the universities' marketing drives. In other words, it is the competitive, corporate capture of universities that best explains the number of closures of entire languages departments in the UK's non-elite universities and the inevitable, eventual and consequential reduction in teachers of, and incentives for, language learning at second level.

In Ireland meanwhile, though University College Dublin no longer offers degrees in Arabic or Hebrew, and though the entire School of Modern Languages was recently shut down in the University of Coleraine across the border in Northern Ireland, some years after Queen's University in Belfast had closed down its Departments of Russian and German, there are some sources of potential comfort to advocates of multilingualism in Ireland. One such example of support is a statement by the then Chief Executive of the Higher Education Authority, Tom Boland, that languages are the new top priority subjects in Higher Education (specifically, he said that they may or should replace the priority given to the STEM disciplines, i.e. science, technology, engineering and mathematics).<sup>51</sup>

What is absolutely crucial in this respect, however, is the place of Irish in the education system as a whole. Apart entirely from the spectacular rise of the Naíonra/Gaelscoil/GaelCholáiste movement (immersive education through the medium of the Irish language at pre-school/primary/secondary levels), the remarkable fact is that all school-going children in the Republic are *by law entitled* to be taught one other language in addition to the language of schooling (Irish or English), and are thereby universally exposed to the educational challenge presented by a plurilingual (i.e. bilingual) opening. In other words, the Irish educational system guarantees *universal provision* of 8 + 6 years of instruction in the Irish language. Thus, although many aspects of the putative third-level educational slide are comparable across the entire Anglo world (UK, USA, Australia...and Ireland), this Irish ambition might be expected to mitigate in Ireland the educational attrition associated with the global economic hegemony of English.

There is much highly mediated controversy in Ireland regarding the level attained by pupils in the Irish language and this includes regular eruptions of polemical outrage concerning the imposition upon all children of instruction in a 'useless' or 'relic' language. Regarding the first accusation of a poor return for the pedagogical investment (i.e. poor exit levels of achievement or competency in the target language), there appears to be evidence that Irish could indeed be most effectively learned *not only as a language of daily interactional or transactional communication but also as a language of cultural transmission, continuity, identification, originality/specificity and belonging*. As the third part of this article shows, this double approach would seem to match the expectations and motivations of the vast majority of school-based learners. However, if the language is to be learned in this way, it would still have to be learned as a language, in other words as immersively as possible, rather than as an academic subject. This could mean, for example, presenting Irish history and folklore *through the target language* from a very early age (this approach is called CLIL, or Content and

<sup>51</sup> See <http://www.eurireland.ie/news/joint-ireland-germany-traineeship-initiative-launched.2332.html> (Accessed on 20 June, 2016).

Language Integrated Learning). It has been shown in many pedagogical studies that, even with the learning of non-‘heritage’ languages (e.g. Irish schoolchildren learning French through learning French games, songs, nursery rhymes etc.), efficacy levels are very high for the immersive approach, especially when specialist teachers with native competence mediate the CLIL.

While the learning of Irish may indeed need to be optimised, it remains that objections to the ‘compulsory’ dimension of Irish-language instruction at primary/secondary level appear to be triply (if not quadruply) misplaced. Firstly, they displace attention from the policy of ‘*compulsory provision*’ (an onus on education and school administrations *to provide* instruction in Irish) to the issue of ‘*compulsory acquisition*’ (where the compulsion is misattributed to the pupils). Unfortunately, there are many politico-economic forces that would be only too delighted to see the primary and secondary school system relieved of the economic burden of being obliged to deliver universal Irish instruction over fourteen years of schooling. Moreover, there is no doubt that the first schools to be stripped of plurilingual provision would be those located in socio-economically deprived areas. Secondly, any emphasis on the *compulsory learning* of Irish tends to distract attention from the *quality* of the provision; thus, instead of struggling to meet the challenges of *optimal-outcome* provision (using CLIL, for example) it is much easier to argue that the *entire plurilingual ambition* be jettisoned. And thirdly, the anti-compulsion lobby displaces attention from the benefits of plurilingualism (including the cognitive benefits mentioned in the first section of this article) to the benefits/lack of benefit of the learning of *one specific* ‘other’ language.

A fourth and final factor may further and definitively discredit the anti-compulsion argument. Although those who call for the removal of the ‘compulsory provision of Irish’ often argue that instruction in a language *other than Irish* (a more global language such as Spanish or Chinese, for example) would be more ‘useful’ and would prepare learners better for taking their place in the so-called ‘knowledge economy’, in fact there appears to be no will, and certainly no concrete plan, to substitute *any other language or plurilingual programme* for Irish. Instead, the idea seems to be that the cheaper, diluted ‘language lite’ aim of ‘pluri-cultural exposure’ will be substituted for concrete plurilingual competence and literacy. At *any* educational level, this substitution of ‘multi-cultural aspirationism’ for ‘multilingual competence’ is a terrible impoverishment. It is impossible to overestimate the harm that is done when early language learning is replaced by early cultural initiation. For *young* children who have the potential to learn so many languages so very well, and to benefit so enormously from whatever early plurilingual exposure can be organised for them, the loss and waste of this potential benefit must be incalculable.

There are unanswerably strong arguments for French schools and universities, for example, not to abandon the development of literacy in French for the development of literacy in English. This is why there are many outspoken critics of the ever more widespread (business-driven) use of English-language instruction in some of the most prestigious French third-level establishments such as ‘SciencesPo’ (the Ecole nationale des sciences politiques). Those arguments for the safeguarding of ‘national’ languages against the levelling force of hegemonic global vernaculars like Globish led Iceland to establish Icelandic as its official (and not just as its national) language in 2011, and to enact legislation to protect the status of the language in its education system. The situation facing Irish in Ireland or Welsh in Wales is, of course, quite different to the situation of Icelandic in Iceland or of French in France. Long before its global hegemony was established, English was in unequal competition with the native languages of Ireland and Wales, and so the case for Irish and Welsh schools teaching through Irish or Welsh, or even imposing these languages as compulsory curricular subjects, is a doubly daunting prospect. It remains, however, that the cost of surrendering those languages is also very

daunting. For even if, like all the other aforementioned languages, Irish is the main guarantee of Ireland's sustained connection with the great human imperatives of memory, meaning, identity and general connectedness with place and with the past, we have seen that there are other strong arguments in favour of maintaining its place in the Irish education system: most notably, perhaps, the arguments relating to its potentially crucial role as a portal to a more fully multilingual platform.

Persistent and exponential educational advantage can be observed in children who learn to read and play music and who learn other languages, *any other* languages, and preferably *lots of them*.<sup>52</sup> If every Irish nursery and primary school could allow children to learn the authentic sound and writing systems of three, four, five or six new languages and also to learn how to read and play music, there is absolutely no doubt that we would be doing all the state's children a favour that would bring huge benefits in years to come. This approach to plurilingual initiation would, however, best complement and supplement the learning of Irish (using an optimal, preferably immersive CLIL method) rather than replacing it. In fact, precisely because of the commitment to, and engagement in, the learning of one 'second' language (i.e. a language other than the language of instruction), Ireland is particularly well placed to introduce other languages at primary or even pre-school level. In other words, Irish provision is already a nod in the direction of the multilingual principle.

The fact is that learning another language at young age makes it easier, not harder, to learn several other languages. Multilingual education develops multicultural sensibility and intercultural competence in a way that no other activity can. In addition, it favours the development of intellectual flexibility and dexterity. Moreover, in these times of increased digital mobility and multicultural opening, active respect for the value of linguistic diversity opens opportunities for tolerance, empathy and respect for difference, and reinforces those values in a way that cannot be equalled by mere theoretical learning about cultural differences in abstraction. There is no more respectful gesture one can make than addressing the other in the other's language. And there is no better way to appreciate the otherness of the other than through his/her/its language.

### III. Student Attitudes to Learning the Irish Language

Given that government policy on promoting the Irish language appears to rely largely on maintaining the latter's status as a compulsory subject in all Irish primary and post-primary schools, it is important to investigate student attitudes to learning the language as a way of assessing how this policy is perceived by young learners of the language. To this end, a questionnaire survey was carried out among pupils of Irish secondary schools in May 2016. There were 495 responses. Of the respondents, 467 (94.34%) had learned the Irish language at school and 435 (87.88%) had studied the language for more than five years. 87.27% of the

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<sup>52</sup> This is why, indeed, the European Commission has formulated a firm plurilingual directive for the EU's primary education systems. The European Centre for Modern Languages is the body charged with supporting this multilingual policy across the EU, while in Ireland, the Post-Primary Languages Initiative has been launched to provide support for it at the national level. However, at primary level, *almost no* Irish primary schools are currently providing what all primary schools in the EU are urged by the European Commission to aim for: namely, intra-curricular instruction in at *least two languages* in addition to the language of instruction. Over 50% of European primary schools are currently implementing this policy, while in all but a handful of private primary schools in Ireland, the only second-language provision is in Irish and any initiation into a third language is bought and paid for by parents outside school hours. In 1998, however, Ireland did introduce a pilot scheme for teaching languages (French, Spanish, German, Italian) in primary schools. The 'Modern language initiative in primary schools', as it was eventually called, was halted in 2011, however. Although the principal challenge to the continuance of the programme were the costs of resourcing it, another much-cited challenge to the plurilingual classroom in Irish primary schools is the crowded curriculum.

pupils took Irish as one of the subjects for the Junior Certificate;<sup>53</sup> 83.17% as one of the subjects for the Leaving Certificate.<sup>54</sup>

The results of the survey support many of the points made in the first two sections of this study. Firstly, the survey results show that motivation of the school pupils to learn Irish language is mainly examination-driven: learners focus mainly on meeting the requirements for passing the Leaving Certificate (the final second-level examination in Ireland). When asked about their motivations and attitudes regarding their study of Irish, 50.21% (241 out of 480) of the respondents suggested that they simply wanted to pass Irish in their exams and 40.42% (194 out of 480) suggested that they hoped that learning Irish would help them get higher points in the Leaving Certificate. Only a minority of the pupils wished to learn the language at Higher or Honours (rather than Ordinary or Pass) level: 27.92% (134 out of 480). (See Chart 1).

**Chart 1. Q6: What were your intentions when learning the Irish language? (You can tick more than one answer)**

| Answer Choices                                 | Responses     |     |
|--|---------------|-----|
| Simply have a taste of Irish language          | <b>17.92%</b> | 86  |
| Able to have basic oral communication in Irish | <b>33.33%</b> | 160 |
| Able to have basic skills in written Irish     | <b>18.75%</b> | 90  |
| Able to speak fluent Irish                     | <b>27.92%</b> | 134 |
| Able to have good skills in written Irish      | <b>19.17%</b> | 92  |
| Simply to pass Irish in an exam                | <b>50.21%</b> | 241 |
| To help get high points in the Leaving Cert    | <b>40.42%</b> | 194 |
| Other (please specify)                         | <b>15.00%</b> | 72  |
| <b>Total Respondents: 480</b>                  |               |     |

This low percentage is perhaps understandable, given that Irish is not widely used for daily communication. Across the whole country there are few contexts where Irish is dominant in daily use. For job-seekers, being able to speak Irish does not confer any significant advantage in most competitive job markets.

However, when asked whether they perceive that learning the Irish language is useful, 42.42% of the respondents (207 out of 488) replied in the affirmative as against 38.52% who disagreed (188 out of 488). Among those who answered 'Yes', 52.44% thought that learning Irish confers an understanding of Irish culture, while 45.33% believed that learning the language can favour career development and 32% believed that it can favour the acquisition of other languages (see Chart 2).

<sup>53</sup> Almost all junior cycle students take courses leading to the Junior Certificate, the State examination taken at the end of the third year of junior cycle, when students are 15 years of age. Subjects are normally studied at either Ordinary or Higher Level, although three subjects, Irish, English and mathematics, can also be studied at Foundation Level. See the official website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at [http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Post-Primary\\_Education/Junior\\_Cycle/Junior\\_Certificate/](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Junior_Certificate/)

<sup>54</sup> The Leaving Certificate (Established) is a two-year programme that aims to provide learners with a broad, balanced education while also offering some specialisation towards a particular career option. Students following the Leaving Certificate (Established) programme are required to study at least five subjects, one of which must be Irish. See the official website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at [http://ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Post-Primary\\_Education/Senior\\_Cycle/Overview-of-Senior-Cycle/Leaving\\_Certificate\\_Established\\_/The\\_Leaving\\_Certificate\\_Established\\_.html](http://ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Senior_Cycle/Overview-of-Senior-Cycle/Leaving_Certificate_Established_/The_Leaving_Certificate_Established_.html).

Chart 2. Q8: If your answer to Q7 is 'Yes', please tell us the reasons

| Answer Choices   | Responses |     |
|--|-----------|-----|
| learning Irish language can help me understand Irish culture | 52.44%    | 118 |
| learning Irish language can help me learn other language/s   | 32.00%    | 72  |
| Learning Irish language can help me develop my future career | 45.33%    | 102 |
| Other (please specify)                                       | 12.00%    | 27  |
| <b>Total Respondents: 225</b>                                |           |     |

This result indicates that school pupils' views on the usefulness of learning Irish are indeed associated with building their capability to learn and communicate in other languages, with a significant proportion of respondents recognising the value of the bilingual/plurilingual approach discussed above. A greater proportion, however, sees the benefit of learning the language either as contributing to their future career development or as helping them to understand their own culture and place in the world, which, as we discussed above, can be better appreciated if one speaks Irish and appreciates the profound socio-cultural and historical meaning underlying it. Accordingly, among the respondents who regarded learning Irish as worthwhile or interesting (52.2%, 253 out of 481), more than half of them (57.26%) suggested that this was because learning Irish history and culture through Irish is important and valuable. (see Chart 3).

Chart 3. Q10: If your answer Q9 is 'Yes', please tell us the reasons

| Answer Choices   | Responses |     |
|--|-----------|-----|
| Learning Irish Grammar is interesting to me                                    | 24.36%    | 57  |
| Learning Irish pronunciation is interesting to me                              | 26.92%    | 63  |
| Learning Irish words is interesting to me                                      | 45.73%    | 107 |
| Learning Irish history and culture through Irish language is interesting to me | 57.26%    | 134 |
| <b>Total Respondents: 234</b>  |           |     |

On the importance of learning the Irish language, the majority of pupils surveyed (67.71%, 325 out of 480) suggested that learning the language is important because of its association with Irish national identity and pride. Of the 253 respondents, 77.85% suggested that every country should have their own language and 56% said that without the Irish language, Irish people would lose their identity. This shows that the Irish language is seen by respondents as a valuable cultural marker by which Irish people are identified as a unique nation in the world. Amongst those respondents who expressed their views in the Open Comment section of the questionnaire, many respondents do appreciate the importance of Irish in helping Irish people maintain a sense of national identity and pride:

The Irish language is so important as it is our own language. We need to keep it alive. (I\_9)

I think everybody should be fluent in their national language and have their own language because it is important to be able to speak your own language proudly and fluently. (I\_1)

This association with patriotic sentiment and national consciousness is clearly sufficient motivation for some of the respondents to learn the Irish language:



I think our Irish language is very important. It is very important to me. I want to be able to speak my national language so I want to keep learning it. (I\_3)

I really and truly love the Irish language mainly because I am from Ireland every person in or from Ireland should know a little bit of Irish, because it is so important and from my heart and soul I think.

I like learning Irish because otherwise Ireland wouldn't have a national language and I feel like that would be sad. (I\_35)

I like learning Irish because it is my countries language and I feel good being able to speak my own language. (I\_48)

In this context, the Irish language seems to be viewed more as a national treasure and cultural heritage than as a living language for day-to-day communication. It connects learners with Irish history and with the socio-cultural traditions that enhance the Irish people's national confidence. Thus, of 325 respondents, 59.69% said that having the Irish language made them feel proud of being Irish and 36% indicated that Irish puts them in touch with the past and with their own people (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Q12: If your answer to Q11 is 'Yes', please tell us the reasons (you can tick more than one answer)**

| Answer Choices   | Responses         |
|--|-------------------|
| Every country should have their own language                                   | <b>77.85%</b> 253 |
| Without the Irish language we would lose our identity                          | <b>56.00%</b> 182 |
| Having a second language is good for brain functioning                         | <b>33.85%</b> 110 |
| The Irish language puts us in touch with the past, with our own people         | <b>36.92%</b> 120 |
| Not knowing my own language makes me feel uneducated                           | <b>28.92%</b> 94  |
| Having the Irish language makes me feel proud of being Irish                   | <b>59.69%</b> 194 |
| Through the Irish language I have accessed to a great oral and written culture | <b>24.00%</b> 78  |
| Other (please specify)   | <b>1.85%</b> 6    |
| <b>Total Respondents: 325</b>  |                   |

However, the fact that Irish is seen as a national treasure and cultural heritage does not seem to give it enough importance, in these respondents' eyes, to warrant its being a compulsory subject in school curriculum. Amongst those respondents who expressed their views in the Open Comment section of the questionnaire, many strongly disagreed with government policy in relation to Irish (maintaining Irish as a compulsory subject of study in all primary and secondary schools). For example, one of the respondents expressed the following view:

In my opinion, I think Ireland having their own language is important. I strongly feel it should stay but I don't agree with the fact that I am being forced to learn it. If people want to learn Irish, it will be by their own free choice and learning it will be so much better because they actually want to. But forcing people to learn it isn't the way to do things. (I\_60)

The main reason given by pupils for their opposition to this policy is the irrelevance of Irish to daily communication as well as to the world of work:

I think Irish is a great language but unless you want to teach Irish or work in the Gaeltacht it is irrelevant to anything the rest of your life and is not going to be of use in life other than the idea of speaking a language nobody understands. It won't be something I will continue to use when I finish school like French. (I\_51)



It's absolutely pointless. When are we ever going to use it? (I\_12)

Don't make us learn languages that we don't actually need. (I\_62)

I believe it is unfair to expect students to have a high level of Irish in this day and age. Due to the development of the countries relationship with other countries and the increasing number of immigrants, I think Irish should be converted to an optional subject for everyone. The lack of career advantages that it gives is another reason why it should be regarded as optional language It is only useful to people such as an Irish teacher. (II\_2)

It is clear from the above arguments that the major reason why respondents object to the compulsory learning of Irish is their perception of the 'pointless', 'useless', 'unnecessary' status of the language in relation to usage and career development. Indeed, many of the respondents suggested that they should be given an opportunity to learn other, more useful languages or subjects instead of Irish.

The time, money and energy spent on teaching/training and learning Irish generally goes to waste as there is only an extremely small area in Ireland that speaking Irish is accepted. I personally think that learning a modern language from a young age would be far more beneficial for the child in the long run. (I\_41)

I feel it is not useful as it cannot be used throughout the world. It is the national attempt at keeping a culture going but at the expense of our knowledge students could be using their time and knowledge to learn about other languages such as Chinese. (I\_6)

I think it's pointless. I feel people can learn Irish if they wish but it should definitely not be compulsory. I don't understand why we need it, if no other countries speak it. Isn't the point of a language to communicate with others? It is wasting my precious time when I could be learning another useful life skill. (I\_64)

It's a waste of time and we should be spending more time in school learning about things that will actually help us in the future. We won't use it after school so there is no point..... (I\_69)

Thus, the majority of the pupils surveyed do not believe that they should be obliged to learn the language as a Leaving Certificate subject simply because it fosters national pride in, and identification with an original culture and heritage:

I don't believe that the Irish language should be forced upon people at such a young age. I agree that it is important for the culture and heritage of the country, but it should be a choice. The student should be able to choose which language they study, not forced into a subject which has very little relevance in future jobs or general life. (II\_6)

Learning the language so we don't lose it but don't have Leaving Cert and Junior Cert exams on it because it lowers our points because it is hard to learn. (I\_53)

I find it unhelpful as we will not use it in our everyday lives when we finish school. I mean it is a part of our heritage but there is no point learning it as it is stressful to learn French as well as Irish. It means we have more these to worry about when it will not be part into practice during our out of school lives. (I\_66)

Good for culture, not for a state exam. Shouldn't be taught like English. Should be included in a choice, like other more useful languages. (I\_79)

I understand that the Gaelic language is very much part of our culture but the reasons for not doing Irish are strong in this day in age. (I\_41)

Some of the pupils surveyed even compared Irish with some of dead languages such as Latin and suggested that Irish 'should be a choice subject like Latin' (II\_30). Moreover, some respondents claim that the effect of forcing all school pupils to learn a language which is thought to be irrelevant to their day-to-day communication and future jobs is to inhibit the

interest and enjoyment that young learners could otherwise associate with the language, and even to induce a certain hatred towards the language.

I think Irish should not be compulsory for the Leaving Cert as it takes any and all enjoyment out of the actual language. (I\_82)

I think Irish should not be compulsory after junior school as it is not enjoyable and it's not about learning the language of your country it is solely about passing an exam. (I\_61)

Boring and pointless. (I\_21)

I think that the Irish language would be more liked by students if it wasn't tested on. (I\_73).

There is more to being Irish than being able to speak the language - not useful for after school careers. Should be a choice subject not forced as it creates hatred towards the language. (I\_78)

The fact that they are learning the Irish language without interest and motivation is also one of the reasons given by young learners as an explanation for their feeling that it is a difficult language to learn.

I find that learning the Irish language is very difficult. I also think it is very unnecessary for us to have to learn the language. (I\_25)

The Irish language is so hard and I also think it is forced upon us and only puts extra pressure on us for exams. I hope it gets cancelled. (I\_27)

Even some respondents who claim to love learning the language state that they would like to learn it for their own interest rather than as a compulsory subject.

Irish language is interesting; however, it shouldn't be an exam subject. (II\_19)

I enjoy learning it as I feel more in touch with my heritage but I don't enjoy the way it is taught in schools and forced upon us. (II\_3)

It is important to note that, in addition to negative comment on the compulsory status of the subject, respondents to our survey also criticised the way Irish is currently taught in schools. The specific syllabus is accused of discouraging pupils, undermining their interest and even of alienating some learners from the language.

Personally, I feel if it was taught better, I would enjoy learning it more. It is not something I really enjoy. (II\_7)

I think it is taught badly and all of my friends hate it. (I\_24)

Although the language and culture is indeed important, how it is taught in schools and the content in which we have to study is sort of ridiculous. (I\_81)

In a startling contradiction, the more specific critiques of the pedagogical approach to Irish or at least of the set syllabus or programme followed in the subject rejects the very aspect of the language that seems to be valued most highly by respondents as the language's chief benefit: namely as the vector of cultural identity, originality and content. Although able to recognise the fact that Irish is not a commonly used language in Irish people's daily communication, some respondents still express frustration at not being enabled to learn Irish as a spoken language rather than learning about Irish literature and culture.

I like learning the language but I think it is unfair to ask people to learn stories and poems if they struggle with languages. (I\_76)

I think the way Irish is taught should be changed because people would prefer to learn the language not poetry and stories. (I\_89)

It should focus more on everyday language and culture rather than studying poetry and literature in such extreme detail, which is what I believe puts so many young people off the language. (I\_81)

I feel there should be more focus on the oral language, and less on poetry etc. (I\_7)

I think we should be taught a basic level. I don't think we should have to study stories and poems. It makes us hate Irish. (I\_5)

We learn too many poems/stories to have time to learn how to speak the language well. (II\_17)

Some of the pupils surveyed also suggested that the Irish language was taught with too much emphasis on writing and grammar, an approach that limited their opportunities to improve their ability to speak the language.

I would like to have enough Irish to have a simple conversation. I think there should be more emphasis on being able to speak Irish rather than write it as the only time I can see myself using Irish after I finish school would be to have the ability to speak a few sentences in Irish to an older person. (II\_21)

The way Irish is taught isn't good, too much emphasis on written than speaking. (I\_10)

We should learn how to speak Irish not just write it. (I\_15)

I think we should be taught about the Irish language and speaking it rather than grammar or poetry. Writing poetry questions, stories or answering reading comprehensions doesn't help our Irish. (I\_46)

It should be done less through learning grammars as this makes the learning of it forcing and most of the time more difficult. (II\_12)

For those pupils who wish to become fluent in spoken Irish after completing the course, the learning outcomes can be disappointing. For example, some pupils surveyed suggested:

Although I have been studying the Irish language all my life. I don't feel my level in Irish is anywhere near fluent. The language is taught as a compulsory inconvenience rather than a language. For example, having studied French only since I started secondary school. I already feel that my level of French has surpassed that as my Irish. (II\_8)

I believe the way we learn Irish is stupid and absurd. We should learn it like we learn Spanish + French. None of us can speak the language let alone write essays in it. (I\_77)<sup>55</sup>

In summary, the results of this school survey, despite the multiple contradictions and paradoxes that they reveal, indicate that, as Ireland's first official language, though actively spoken by only a small minority of people, the Irish language, when thought of in positive terms, is regarded by young learners as a national treasure and heritage that helps to maintain Irish national identity and pride. In that sense, it is valued as part of the Irish cultural tradition rather than as a living language for daily communication or future career development. Thus, the surveyed pupils appreciated the importance of preserving Irish in terms of preserving the Irish cultural heritage and the sense of national identity, while often strongly disagreeing with the Irish government's policy of making the language a compulsory subject for the Leaving Certificate.

<sup>55</sup> Whereas we have not pointed out any of the factual inaccuracies or logical contradictions expressed by the survey respondents, we do need to point out here that, in the Leaving Certificate (Higher), the oral examination counts for 40% of the total grade, whereas in other modern languages, it only counts for 25%. Moreover, whereas students are not required to write any essays whatsoever in the target language for the Leaving Certificate (Higher) German or French written papers (only one paper for each of these language subjects), they are required to write both target-language essays (free composition) and essay-type answers on both of the two written papers in Irish.

The value of preserving and protecting the language does not seem to be questioned (in the abstract at least). What is questioned is not, then, the gain associated with ‘having’ a unique national language, but rather the ‘pain’ involved in ‘gaining’ or ‘claiming’ that asset. In fact, the compulsion policy is actually claimed by some to have reduced pupils’ interest in learning the language. It can also be blamed for putting unnecessary pressure on them in their studies in school, for encouraging a passive attitude amongst learners and for giving very limited motivation to succeed (whereby learners only aspire to pass the subject in state exams or, at best, use it to receive more credits or higher points in the Leaving Certificate).

Clearly, many respondents believe that Irish should be set as an optional subject to be learned exclusively by those interested in learning the language for their own reasons. Our survey identifies three types of motivation cited, albeit in frequently self-contradictory arguments, as likely reasons for students to choose optional instruction in Irish: being able to speak it fluently, being able to read and write it competently, and learning about Irish history and culture through Irish.

To a certain extent, then, our respondents’ views support the general thesis proposed in this article that, in the long term, Irish will most probably continue to have an important social and cultural role coupled with declining relevance politically and economically. Given young peoples’ focus on developing their (economic) careers, it is not surprising that many would be in favour of ending its status as a compulsory subject, especially where it has been taught in a manner that does not meet their (sometimes contradictory) expectations of learning it as a living language and/or as a portal to a proud sense of cultural specificity and identification.

The fact remains, however, that it is in their childhood and youth that people are paradoxically both more able to learn many languages well and more interested in joining the ever more homogenous, globally dominant cultural, political and economic world of high capitalism. It is probably only as they mature that they may become more interested in their original cultural identity, in their increasingly multicultural identity and in the richness of the world’s cultural diversity. The challenge is to ensure that young people are allowed to learn Irish (and other languages) before their ease of linguistic acquisition fades. One solution may be to allow children to learn multiple languages from a much earlier age and to learn Irish in particular in a way that fully reflects its (special) cultural value in Ireland.

## Conclusion

How to preserve endangered languages is a serious challenge in today’s apparently shrinking world and in the case of the Irish language, as it has been discussed in the article, the linch-pin of government policy (making the language a compulsory subject not just at primary level but also at second level) seems not to be entirely successful. The key issue, as we discovered from our research, is not whether the language should continue to be a compulsory subject at second level or not – a debate that has lasted for about one hundred years, is ongoing and is indissociably linked to the value ascribed to linguistic diversity and to the link between language and cultural identity – but rather how to deepen people’s awareness of the value of (learning) languages in general, this or that language in particular, and how to formulate those strategic objectives most likely to uphold that value through education. Amongst the converging conclusions that emerge from the study as a whole, some in particular stand out: first, the need for a clearly understood social, cultural, philosophical, political, anthropological or ecological *rationale*, which clearly identifies the value of *linguistic diversity and of plurilingual competence*, both in general and also in specific cultural contexts; second, the particular value or special status within that rationale of languages (such as Irish) that serve as *vectors of continuity and connection* with a specific identity, a specific past and a specific place

– a status that does not justify, however, any reduction whatsoever of plurilingual ambition more generally; third, the distinction that must be made between the optimal way of learning *languages of identification or acculturation*, on the one hand, and of learning *multiple ‘other’ or ‘foreign’ languages* on the other hand. While an immersive approach has been proven to be the most effective in all language-learning contexts, it is possible that, in the first case at least (i.e. in the learning of languages of identification and acculturation) a content-based integrated approach concentrating on cultural value or content, including history, mythology, social geography and literature (both written and oral, including poetry and song) might be introduced at as early a stage as possible to great advantage. In the second case, however, in early learning at least, there can be considerable benefit from a less integrated, more modular approach to initiation into *multiple* language systems. This multilingual initiation would ideally accompany, however, the more intensive, maximally immersive and content-integrated learning of at least one or two key vehicular and/or cultural languages, languages other than the language of schooling (Irish or Spanish for example). Finally, we would like to leave the reader with the following thought. As global languages like English become increasingly value-free, 'second languages' like Irish will increasingly become the embodiment of community and national values. In that case, shouldn't Irish be treated less as a 'second language' than as a 'cultural language', an idiom serving people's inter-communication – and development – at deeper or higher levels than the physical, political and economic?

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