

Irish as a World Language

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I WOULD LIKE TO CONSIDER HERE some aspects of the current situation of the Irish language and some aspects of its recent history. In particular, I would like to think about that situation, and about the history that has shaped it in recent times, in fairly broad context—that is, in the light of certain worldwide shifts and trends.

I always feel more than a slight embarrassment when embarking on this kind of discussion—an uncomfortable sense of pretending to a kind of expertise that I do not in fact have. I know something about the language situation in Ireland, but there are others who know much more. I am a linguist by profession, but the work I do is mostly in theoretical syntax (in the Chomskyan mode) and I have no particular expertise, beyond what almost any linguist would have, in the area of language-maintenance or language-loss. So what I have to say on these matters, as far as most linguists are concerned, consists in the main of banalities.

For all that, though, what I am in a position to do, and what I have been trying to do in recent years, is to bring together two streams of knowledge and observation—one from Ireland, the other from linguistics. To the extent that this is a useful thing to do it is because these two streams of thought and commentary have not much met or much influenced each other. On the one hand, a lot of what I read in the linguistics literature about the language situation in Ireland strikes me as being wrong or incomplete in important ways. On the other, debates about the language situation in Ireland seem to me to have been extraordinarily parochial and insular—conducted largely in ignorance of, or in inattention to, the larger context in which they should most naturally and usefully be framed.

My goal here, then, as it has been in a number of such discussions in recent years, will be first to try to think about the situation of Ireland and Irish in a way that is shaped by knowledge of the larger context, and then reciprocally to bring back to that larger debate whatever there is to be learned from the Irish experience. There is something to be learned, I think, in both directions.

When I speak here of a ‘larger context’ for the discussion of the language situation in Ireland, the framework that I have in mind, of course, is that of global language extinction. There is less need now than there would have been even five years ago to spell out here what the facts are. Within the profession, the alarm bells were

first rung in an article published in 1991 in *Language*, the journal of the Linguistic Society of America.¹ In the years that have gone by since that paper appeared, there has been considerable debate within the profession about what the causes of these changes are, and about what the response (in professional and ethical terms) ought to be. About the facts themselves, however, there has been no argument, and there has been no challenge that I am aware of to the original bleak assessment made by Hale, Krauss and their colleagues in the 1991 paper. In more recent years, the facts have also become widely known, in outline at least, in the wider world beyond technical linguistics.

Nobody knows exactly how many distinct languages are spoken in the world today. That is in part because there are still corners of the world about which we in the west know little. In part it is because the term itself (the term *language*) is fundamentally obscure. Do we count all forms of Chinese as ‘one language’? Do we include Haitian creole as a kind of ‘French’ or do we count it as a separate language? On what basis do we say that the modes of speech of working-class Glaswegians and of Shetland farmers count as kinds of ‘English’ (whatever that is), but that Tok Pisin (the official language of New Guinea) does not? There are no facts-of-the-matter here, no definitive answers to such questions.

This conceptual unclarity is interesting and important; difficult questions lurk within it. But there are also certain facts about which there is neither unclarity nor doubt.

The first such fact is that, no matter how you count or categorize them, there are many fewer distinct varieties of human language now than there used to be. This is true whether one counts national languages or local dialects. Recent studies in the US and in the Netherlands, among many others, confirm that the same socio-political forces which are driving independent ‘languages’ to extinction are doing exactly the same to local varieties of apparently strong national languages.²

The second important fact is that the speed with which languages are now being lost is prodigious—the world is losing varieties of speech and writing at a rate never

¹Kenneth Hale, Michael Krauss, Lucille Watahomigie, Akira Yamamoto, Colette Craig, and Laverne Jeanne, ‘Endangered Languages,’ *Language* 68 (1992): 1–42.

²See Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes, ‘Moribund dialects and the endangerment canon: The case of Ocracoke brogue,’ *Language* 71 (1995): 696–721, Geert Driessen, ‘In Dutch? Usage of Dutch regional languages and dialects,’ *Language, Culture, and Curriculum* 18 (2005): 271–285.

before seen in human history. Put another way: the web of linguistic diversity that has been a steady feature of human life for tens of thousands of years is unravelling very fast indeed. Not everyone reacts to these facts in the same way. Some welcome them. Many are appalled by them, and there are others who think one should just look on with Zen-like calm as these processes work themselves out. Whatever view one takes, though, it is surely true that this shift represents a profound change in the way that human beings organize their lives and their interactions with each other and it is one which needs to be taken account of and understood. Taking account of it in a serious way tends to change the way that one thinks about the situation of Irish.

So let me organize what I have to say around the effort to answer a linked pair of questions, with this larger frame of reference firmly in place at every point:

1. What is there to learn from the Irish experience about global language endangerment and how one might respond to it?
2. What is there to learn in Ireland from thinking about the Irish experience and the Irish situation in this global context—the context of rapid language extinction?

The first of these questions is particularly important, for the following reason.

The effort to resist the tide of language-extinction began in Ireland in the late 19th century and was enshrined as official national policy at the time of partial independence in 1922. For a century or so now, that effort has been working itself out in various domains and in various efforts, official and unofficial. That means that we have in the case of Irish what is surely the oldest and most sustained attempt so far to organize consciously and systematically against the threatened extinction of a language. That being so, we would like to assess rationally and carefully what has been achieved in that effort, so that we might better assess what it is possible in principle to do if a community decides to work against the death of one of its languages—what works, what does not work, what is difficult but achievable. There now exists in Ireland a deep well of knowledge and experience about such questions. However, the idea that that well of knowledge and experience might be drawn on in other contexts and in other places—that it might be, as it were, an exportable asset—is not one that figures much in discussion of language issues in Ireland.

But that well of knowledge is all the more important today. If Irish people were among the earliest to have to face into this kind of task, or to choose to face into it, they have been joined in the intervening years by hundreds and thousands of other communities across the globe—communities in which local languages are being driven into disuse by a combination of external and internal pressures.

In discussions of these matters, the situation of Irish is often compared with that of other languages—with Hebrew, with Czech, with Lithuanian (or more recently with Catalan). All of these languages have indeed been the focus of more or less systematic efforts to re-shape them and to introduce or re-introduce them into domains of use from which they had previously been excluded. Needless to say, in the Irish context the comparisons when made are always invidious, and the tone is almost always one of self-recrimination (why can't we manage what the Israelis and the Czechs have managed?)

All of these languages have their own stories and their own lessons to teach. However, for the most perilous cases of language-loss and language-endangerment around the world at present, it is clear that Irish is a closer and more useful model than any of these other languages. By that I mean that the point to which Irish had been reduced by the second half of the 19th century (in the eyes and in the hearts of its own speakers) is very close indeed to the point to which Maori has now been reduced in New Zealand, or to which Ojibwe has been reduced in North America, or to which Inuit has been reduced in Labrador. The census of 1891 reveals that the number of people recorded as being able to speak Irish had been reduced at that point to about 680,000—some 14.4% of the overall population. A far more telling statistic from the same census, however, is that Irish speakers under the age of ten represented in that year no more than 3.5% of their age-group. That arithmetical gap, representing the decision of the vast majority of Irish speakers not to pass the language on to their children, is the mark of a community which, by way of one mechanism or another, has been brought to feel that its language is a burden to be thrown off, rather than a tool which will serve useful purposes. And it is when large numbers of language communities are brought to that same point that we get the phenomenon of widespread language extinction.

The challenges that must be faced by communities which reach that point are chillingly similar to those that have been faced by Irish-speaking communities over

the last 150 years. The urge is strong to yield to the external and internal pressures and to be free of the weary burden of seeming and feeling different. That urge often presents itself in the clothes of modernity and in the guise of rational and un-sentimental self-interest. As the shift works its way through the various layers and strands of the community, the choices that have to be somehow made are difficult and painful ones—What will be the language of instruction in our schools? What will be the language of religious observance? How much pressure should we bring to bear on our young people to make sure that they learn ‘our’ language? Is it legitimate to apply such pressure, and do we do harm to our children in applying it? How will they respond? Is there agreement on what the first person plural pronoun refers to in the first place? These are questions that people and communities in Ireland are all too familiar with.

My own experience is that many of those around the world who are grappling with such questions and problems in their own communities are very aware of what has happened in Ireland (in broad outline if not in detail) and that they look to Ireland for guidance and for models. And that is a very natural thing, given the length and depth of the Irish experience in these matters (a century and a quarter now).

For these kinds of reasons, the question of what can be learned from the Irish experience is an important one. There should be something to learn from that experience about what can, in principle, be achieved if one decides to try to work against the tide of language-extinction. Accepting that the question is a reasonable one, the task then becomes to assess—as rationally and as realistically as possible—the history of language maintenance and revival efforts in Ireland. This should not be such a difficult thing to achieve, given the large quantity of evidence easily available. In practice, however, rational assessment is rare. Discussions of language policy in Ireland are, in the first place, insular and parochial (and therefore uninformed) and, in the second place, clouded by a corrosive mist of cynicism, apathy, and anger—a mist which seeps into just about every corner of the discussion, clouding judgement and making rational assessment difficult and rare.

This negativity emerges in at least two forms—in the almost universal consensus that the ‘revival movement’ is a failure and in the irrational anger that that consensus then gives rise to.

One of the most curious and most revealing features of this strange consensus is the way in which it is shared and mirrored across ‘both sides’ of the language debate—by those who are active in the language movement (such as it is) and by those who strongly oppose it. The anger and polemic found in the writings of Máirtín Ó Cadhain often seem to me to shadow and reflect the anger and polemic found in the writings of a critic of language policies such as the newspaper columnist Kevin Myers. What the two share is a deep sense that official efforts to support Irish have been hypocritical and ineffective, the sense that those efforts have clearly failed, and a kind of fury that these obvious facts are not publicly recognized and acted on. Of course they differ (or seem to differ) in their sense of exactly how these realizations should be acted on. But for all that, it is hard to escape the sense that the one is a strange doppelgänger to the other.

These threads of cynicism, pessimism, and anger about the fate of Irish seem to me to be among the most pervasive themes in contemporary Irish cultural and political life. Perhaps in part because of having achieved some distance from them (by being involved in linguistics as a profession and by having moved to the United States), I am constantly now taken aback by the force with which such feelings are commonly expressed.

There is a kind of interaction which, I think, everyone who is involved in any way at all with Irish (as a teacher, as a speaker, as a writer, as a parent, anything) has been involved in many times.

You meet some young person, usually a young man in his twenties, in some random social context. Conversation proceeds along more or less normal paths until it emerges that you have some connection, personal or professional, with the Irish language.

The conversation then shifts from its conventional paths, and the person you are talking to launches in to a fierce diatribe about how many years he or she spent at school studying Irish and how he or she emerged at the end of that long period knowing next to nothing, has never been capable of putting more than three words together, and has forgotten even how to do that much in the years since leaving school.

The strangest thing about this kind of conversation, in my experience, is that these announcements are almost always made with a kind of defiant pride, or with

a certain fierce kind of pleasure (the kind of pleasure, I suspect, that accompanies the satisfaction of deeply felt but un-articulated desires).

A number of things are striking about these interactions: The first is that they take place so often. The second is that they concern only Irish. While I have conducted no survey, I am virtually certain that physicists, mathematicians and geographers rarely find themselves in conversations with people eager to make a fierce boast of how little physics, mathematics, or geography they know after years of schooling, or to express their anger at having been made study such things.

Here too, though, there is a strange doppelgänger effect, in that this anger is mirrored by that of the language activists who can drive themselves into paroxysms of anger in deliberately confronting and exposing official hypocrisy about the status of Irish as the 'first official language' of the Irish republic.

It is worth asking, I think, what the source of this anger and cynicism might be. At one level the answer is obvious. At the beginning of the maintenance effort, there was a great deal of excessive optimism and a sense that large gains could be made relatively quickly and relatively easily. That this was so is not surprising, because there were few if any models to use as guides, and there was at that point therefore no well of knowledge and experience to draw from which could guide people in the setting of realistic goals. It was not known at that time how difficult the task would turn out to be, or how difficult it is in general to work against the forces which act within a community to lead to language abandonment.

But heightened expectations lead quickly and inevitably to disappointment when they are not met. And that must be part of the explanation for the fog of disillusion and cynicism that covers almost all talk of language maintenance in Ireland.

Some of this anger and sourness clearly also grows out of a distaste for the authoritarian and insular turn of mind with which language activism in Ireland has been, fairly or unfairly, associated (witness Hugo Hamilton's chilling recent memoir *The Speckled People* for instance). Put another way, Irish language activism was co-opted by some of the narrowest and darkest forces in twentieth century Ireland.

But it has always seemed to me that there was something darker and less rational at play here as well. When you listen to a young man or young woman speak with a kind of defiant and furious pride about how little Irish they know after years of schooling, you know that a nerve has been touched, that the language is acting as

a symbolic lightning rod for feelings that will never attach to more routine subjects like geometry, chemistry or French.

My step-daughter is Chinese-American—a California girl. She spent three months attending a national school in Dublin at the age of eight or so, when my wife and I were spending a three month sabbatical in Ireland. She had, of course, not one word of Irish before she began attending school in Dublin. Her previous exposure to the language did not go much beyond a vague knowledge that I and some of my friends in Ireland spoke it, along with whatever knowledge might derive from an affection for the music of Altan. For that reason, she was very nervous indeed at the prospect of being required to study Irish in her new school. As it turned out, from the first week, she was doing better in her Irish homework and exams than anyone else in her class—a pattern which continued until the end of her period in the school and one which caused some surprise (and needless to say some resentment among her classmates). Towards the end of our stay in Dublin, we talked about this (to us surprising) pattern of events with her teacher and with the principal of the school—a wise and experienced woman who had neither a particular sympathy for, nor a particular antipathy towards, the language. Both confirmed that the pattern we had seen was, in their experience, a very common one—that children coming from abroad to attend the school for brief periods tended to do extremely well in Irish, to fare, in fact, much better than their Irish counterparts. The reason seemed to them completely obvious: the foreign students did not bring to the task of learning Irish the emotional and cultural baggage that Irish children are burdened with as they approach the same task.

Anecdotes are dangerous when used as evidence, but still such stories seem to me to reflect a persistent reality in contemporary Irish life. Cynicism, anger, negativity, and a barely buried guilt pervade almost all talk of the language, of its situation, and of the various efforts that have been made to change its situation. And it seems obvious that, whatever other sources such feelings have, their principal breeding ground has been within the long, long post-colonial shadow.

John Waters put it best in a perceptive piece published some years ago,³ in which he said that the language had become ‘the repository of much of our post-colonial neurosis.’

³‘Taking the tyranny out of Irish,’ *Irish Times* July 12th of 2004.

But whatever the source of these feelings, there is no doubt, I think, that they have clouded, and continue to cloud, almost all discussion in Ireland of the situation of Irish and of the various efforts and policies that were designed to affect that situation. Distance and rationality have been hard to achieve.

It is also true, I think, that this dark emotional background, this central element, is the feature of the Irish scene which has been most ignored in discussions outside Ireland of the revival effort.

So say we try to detach ourselves from all this sound and fury, try to achieve some distance, and return to the first of our two questions above and ask what actually has been achieved in Ireland in the effort to resist language extinction, and what there is to be learned from that experience. Once again, we will try to frame the question at every point in the broader context of what is known about the forces that work towards the extinction of weakened languages.

Those efforts have been directed at achieving two broad goals:

1. to preserve the use of Irish in those communities in which it had continued to be the vernacular
2. to create the circumstances under which communities which had made the transition to English, at one point or another in their histories, could become, in a sense which shifted as the effort proceeded, 'Irish-using' communities.

For the first strand, no great success can be claimed. Among those who were young adults or who were middle-aged at the time of the 1891 census—those who in large numbers had already determined not to pass on the felt burden of the language to their children—the ones who had not emigrated were dying in the 1920's, the 1930's and the 1940's. As those generations died in those decades, so we see the inevitable death with them of many varieties of Irish—the Irishes of Derry, of Monaghan, of Sligo, of Leitrim, of Tipperary and of Roscommon. Despite what was perhaps thought at the time, there was never a chance that the course of language extinction could have been turned in such places. The decision to hide the language from the younger generation had been made long before, and that magical but delicate generational link, once broken, cannot be re-forged.

For other *Gaeltacht* communities, a claim frequently made is that the use of Irish has declined in them exactly as rapidly as it would have, had there been no official

effort to halt that decline. This seems not to be true. Lillis Ó Laoire, for instance, has documented⁴ how the change of government in 1922, and the consequent change in policies and attitudes towards Irish which followed, led to a significant strengthening of the position of the language in the parish of Cloich Chionnaola in Donegal (a community which continues to be strongly Irish-speaking to this day). In his view, a view which is based on a detailed and intimate knowledge of the community in question, a generation which ought to have been fully Anglophone if established patterns had persisted ended up being bilingual in Irish and English, or else monolingual in Irish (much to their economic and social disadvantage when they had to emigrate to Scotland and to England). This is probably not an isolated case.

The harshest assessments are therefore probably wrong. For all that, the decline of the use of Irish in traditional *Gaeltacht* communities has continued and continues apace. In the 1960's, the Irish of County Clare reached the point that the Irish of County Derry had reached in the 1920's (spoken only by a relatively small number of old people) and is now no more. Similarly, the Irishes of East Galway, of East Kerry, of Clear Island, and of much of County Cork exist now only in archival form, and there is some reason to believe that the Irish of County Mayo is now close to the point that was reached by the Irish of County Clare some forty years ago. Donegal is the county with the largest Irish-speaking population, but here too, the Irish of Fanad, the Irish of Ros Goill and the graceful dialects of the southern peninsula around Killybegs seem to be largely moribund.⁵

An important additional consequence of these shifts has been that the chain of mutual intelligibility which formerly connected the continuum of dialects from North to South has been broken and the sense of linguistic unity and community correspondingly weakened (although the creation of first *Raidió na Gaeltachta* and then of *Teilifís na Gaeilge/TG4* has done much to repair this damage).

These changes too have been the focus of a great deal of angry commentary. Whether or not outcomes would have been different had different policies been pursued is of course now unknowable (although much discussion of these matters in

⁴'Níl sí doiligh a iompar,' in Ciarán Mac Murchaidh (ed.), *Who Needs Irish: Reflections on the Importance of the Irish Language Today* (Veritas, Dublin 2004).

⁵'Moribund' in the technical sense that they are now spoken only by some older people and so are at the point reached by the Irish of County Derry in the 1920's and 1930's.

Ireland takes for granted that it is knowable).

For what it's worth, my own suspicion is that the outcomes would have been roughly the same no matter what policies had been pursued. When a community first starts down the path ordained to it by the forces which drive language extinction, the process seems to proceed with a terrible kind of mechanistic inevitability. Colleagues who know other such situations well have often talked to me about how one can lay the various sub-communities out on a single time-line and say 'Village A is now at the point that Village B was at ten years ago, and Village B is now at the point that Village C had reached ten years ago,' and so on for each of the villages in question. A given village may be placed at different points on this time-line at a given moment, but the trajectory for all is identical. This may be how language extinction works quite generally.

The conflicts and complicities that define the process work themselves out in the kitchen and in the bedroom, in the school playground rather than in the school classroom—in private, familial, and domestic spaces defined by solidarity, where official and external agencies have virtually no influence. It is one of the very few social processes in which significant power is ceded to fairly young children, children who at one level act as autonomous agents within their own communities and at another level act as proxies for, or instruments of, the larger forces beyond the immediate community—rejecting the traditional language and adopting the new, in acts of solidarity which bind them to each other and separate them from their grandparents. It is very difficult indeed (and it is probably immoral) for governments or movements to design and implement policies which will reach into such private spaces. But those private spaces, and the freedoms inherent in them, are where the conflict is worked out. It is therefore not surprising, I think, that it has proven so difficult to arrest the decline in use of Irish in *Gaeltacht* communities. Nor is this a uniquely Irish failure, although, as usual, much of the Irish commentary on the matter would have it otherwise.

With respect to the second aim, assessment has to be rather different.

Here too, initial hopes were unrealistic. It seems to have been thought that progress would be rapid, that the *Gaeltacht* communities would expand relatively quickly, covering what was previously English-speaking territory, and that they would then meet and join, ultimately creating an Irish-speaking polity. Nothing remotely

like this, of course, ever happened, and it is easy now to look back with scorn on the naïveté of such expectations. However, it is again unsurprising that expectations should have been naïf and unrealistic, given that at the time of their conception there were no models to learn from, no well of experience or knowledge to draw from.

No doubt partly for that reason, and partly because of the general sourness surrounding policy towards Irish, this strand of effort too is standardly regarded in Ireland with some cynicism and often also with some resentment—a resentment bundled up into the term *Gaeilgeoir*, which has now become (in English) almost a blanket term of abuse.

A less insular and more sober assessment, however, would lead to a different conclusion. What emerges from such an assessment, I think, is that this part of the effort to maintain Irish represents one of the most notable achievements so far attained in the global struggle against language extinction. It represents, in fact, the single most successful instance of language revival, or of language maintenance, known to me (the very strange and singular case of Modern Hebrew set aside for the moment). What is un-paralleled in the Irish situation is not what has happened in *Gaeltacht* communities, but rather what has happened, almost un-noticed, outside the *Gaeltacht*—in the creation of a large and energetic second language community, a community now many times larger than the traditional *Gaeltacht*, and one which calls into question (as Angela Bourke in particular has consistently argued) traditional (geographical) notions of what a *Gaeltacht* is.

This ‘second language’ community is made up of those who, for one reason or another (ideological or sentimental or personal) feel some attachment to the language and to *Gaeltacht* communities, and who as a consequence have attained strong second language (L2) ability in the language. Many use Irish consistently in their daily routines, listen to Irish language broadcasts, watch Irish language TV, buy, read, and write books in Irish, send their children to Irish language play-groups (*naíonraí*) and to Irish-medium schools (*Gaelscoileanna*).

It is a large, disparate, well educated, and mostly middle class community. One of the signs of its vibrancy (pointed out to me by a friend who produces Irish language current affairs programming on TV) is the fact that it is possible, in any town in Ireland, to produce a report on any aspect of current affairs entirely in Irish. There

will always be a sufficient number of relevant people (trade union officers, political activists, journalists, teachers and the like) with sufficient command of the language that they can be interviewed and the story presented.

Out of this community have come great cultural riches in the face of enormous odds and difficulties—the poetry of Biddu Jenkinson, of Michael Davitt, of Liam Ó Muirthille, and of Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, the novels of Séamas Mac Annaidh, the criticism of Declan Kiberd, and the songs of John Spillane. Spillane's weekly program on *Raidió na Gaeltachta* proudly proclaims its use of *Gaoluinn na Gaeltachta*—‘the Irish of the non-Irish-speaking community’—a term which ought to be paradoxical but which isn't.

How was this community created? Clearly, it was a community (rather than an official) achievement. The crucial actors have been parents and teachers, and among the crucial institutions have been the *naíonraí*—Irish language pre-schools established in a pioneering effort by a small group of women (Helen Ní Mhurchú, Aingeal Ó Buachalla, Helen Ó Ciosáin especially) with virtually no institutional support, the *Gaelscoileanna* (Irish language schools established outside the official *Gaeltacht*), and the *coláistí samhraidh* (summer colleges in *Gaeltacht* areas for children from non-Irish-speaking areas). More often than not, whatever was achieved was achieved in spite of, rather than thanks to, the efforts of the state (whose actions have often been shameful—as in the closing of the *Coláistí Ullmhúcháin* (teacher training colleges for students from Irish-speaking areas), the resistance to parents' groups trying to set up Irish-medium schools, or the inexplicable failure to provide public services in Irish to *Gaeltacht* communities). Maybe the most important single part of the community effort has been the epic feats of hospitality and language pedagogy performed by the people of the *Gaeltacht*, as they open their houses, schools and communities each summer to students from non Irish speaking areas—efforts that were perhaps in a certain sense self-sacrificial in that the influx of thousands of English speakers stretched already fragile linguistic communities to the limits of tolerance.

I have called this the ‘Second Language Community’ above, but there is a central sense in which this term is inaccurate. There are now many children who have grown up in this community with a new urban version of Irish as one of their first languages, and who have in turn passed that new language on to their own chil-

dren. In the communities that have coalesced around the *Gaelscoileanna* especially, the normal processes of inter-language mixing, perhaps even of pidginization and creolization, have been at work and have produced new urban calques, new and strange mixtures of Irish and English.

There is as a consequence a great range of language-varieties called 'Irish' in use in the 'second-language' community. There are people like me who work hard at speaking some close approximation to traditional *Gaeltacht* Irish, and there are many people who speak (fluently and carelessly) new urban hybrids, heavily influenced by English in every way. For the communities of children growing up around Irish-medium schools in urban centers, it may be right to speak of pidginization and creolization (along with a lot of clever inter-language play like the recent 'cad-ever'). Many teenagers are thoroughly bi-dialectal, switching easily from the version of *Gaeltacht* Irish they have from their parents to the new urban varieties in use among their peers.

There are many who will disparage and sneer at the mixed varieties that are emerging in these complex and shifting environments, but before yielding to that easy urge, it is as well to bear two truths in mind. The first is that such language mixing is the only engine we have for creating new languages; the processes of pidginization and creolization are the only forges in which new languages are cast. A second truth worth bearing in mind is that it was out of just such a mongrel mix (of Anglo-Saxon and French) that Chaucer's English was born.

It will be interesting to see what will happen to these new varieties in the sad event that traditional *Gaeltacht* Irish should become a memory. One thing, though, that is completely clear is that these new linguistic communities are not going to fade away just because the *Gaeltacht* as we now know it fades away.

I know of no parallels to this achievement anywhere else in the world.

In the face of that truth, it is important not to give in to a facile optimism. All communities of Irish speakers face great difficulties, and it is rational to take the bleak view that the Irish experience reveals nothing except what the limits of the possible are in the area of language maintenance. Nevertheless, what has been achieved is real enough and it deserves to be celebrated—celebrated coldly and quietly, in a wide-eyed and unsentimental way. It should be celebrated in full recognition of the limits of what has been achieved, in full realization of what we thereby learn

about the limits of what is in principle achievable in this domain, but with a sense of celebration which is all the larger and more expansive for that realization.

And maybe that is what a half-successful language maintenance effort has to look like. Perhaps the real lesson of the Irish experience is that this is what can be hoped for. By which I mean that it seems to be extraordinarily difficult to work against the historical processes which act within a community to undermine language loyalty and lead to language-shift, to work against the forces which bring people to feel (always irrationally) that knowledge of a language is burdensome. But perhaps what the Irish experience most teaches us is that it is far from impossible to create a new community, whose language draws on elements of the old and elements of the new, and which possesses all the usual and lively public trappings of a language community—literature, music, radio, TV, journalism, schools, drama, politics, comedy, jokes, puns and gossip. Of course what is ‘maintained’ or ‘revived’ in this process, is very different indeed from the language which was the original focus of revivalist efforts and you may very well not much like the mongrels and hybrids that you bring into being along the way.

But in this context, as in most, purism is surely misplaced. For you probably cannot ‘revive’ a seriously weakened language without in the very process transforming it in deep and unexpected ways, and the processes of pidginization and creolization will inevitably play a role in forging new languages and new versions of old languages. We need not be alarmed or put off by these developments, for, if current research is on the right track, creolization is a true and bare reflection of the human language faculty, and is therefore the furnace in which new languages will be formed. This is the living, breathing process of language-creation and all one can do is to keep possibilities alive for it to work on.

We should return finally to the question posed in the title of the workshop out of which this volume grows—‘Why Irish?’

Because it is a language like any other.

Because, as such, it represents one valuable strand in a rapidly thinning and unravelling network of cultural and intellectual resources available to humankind.

Because, in addition to that, it represents one of the most interesting and successful language revitalization projects so far undertaken, and there is therefore much to be learned from its recent history.

It remains to be seen where that project is going to take us, but the one thing that is very clear is that it will take us to some interesting, important, and at present unexplored, place. It will be a place in which there will be a great deal to learn and a great deal to enjoy.