

UHI Research Database pdf download summary

Bilingualism, Restoration and Language Norms

Armstrong, Timothy Currie

Published in:

Strategies for Minority Languages: Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Scotland

Publication date:

2011

The re-use license for this item is:

CC BY-NC

The Document Version you have downloaded here is:

Peer reviewed version

[Link to author version on UHI Research Database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Armstrong, T. C. (2011). Bilingualism, Restoration and Language Norms. In J. M. Kirk, & D. P. Ó Baoill (Eds.), *Strategies for Minority Languages: Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Scotland* (pp. 172-179). Cló Ollscoil na Banríona.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the UHI Research Database are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights:

- 1) Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the UHI Research Database for the purpose of private study or research.
- 2) You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- 3) You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the UHI Research Database

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at RO@uhi.ac.uk providing details; we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Bilingualism, Restoration and Language Norms

Timothy Currie Armstrong

Soillse, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, An t-Eilean Sgitheanach, Alba, UK

sm00ta@uhi.ac.uk

What does bilingualism mean when we use it as a policy goal? If an organisation or polity declares itself bilingual or subscribes to a policy of bilingualism, what sort of language use should we expect as a result of that policy? 'Bilingual' and 'bilingualism' are terms that strain under the semantic burden of a wide range of meanings as they are used to describe both individuals and groups in a number of different contexts, from sociolinguistics to applied linguistics, anthropology, child development, education, language policy and planning, as well as in popular and political discourses on language use and ability (see Dunbar in this volume). And bilingualism is also frequently named as an objective in language policy and planning documents. Certainly, bilingualism in one form or another is a common policy goal at all levels in Ireland and Scotland, but we could ask, given this uncertainty and multiplicity of meanings, is it always clear what specific norms of language use are being advanced when an organisation or polity adopts a policy of bilingualism?

Language norms are one element of language ideology (Kroskrity 2004; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994), and as a link between language ability and use, language ideology plays a key role in the success of language revitalisation. In my research, I have been studying language ideology in small groups, and particularly, language norms in the context of language revitalisation

movements. I am interested in the question of how new minority language norms are established in the course of language revitalisation. This is an important question, I might even argue, the most important question, when it comes to the practicalities of revitalising a language at the micro level. How do we establish new norms of minority-language use in key sites, domains or situations, in businesses, in communities, in schools, and so on?

My interest in this question grew out of my time spent at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic college on the Isle of Skye, first as a student, and more recently, as a lecturer and researcher. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is a fascinating place and we are trying to do something truly unique at the College, or rather, we are trying to do two different unique things. First, we are trying to build an entirely Gaelic-speaking academic community for students and staff at the College. All of our full-time courses are taught in Gaelic, but also, we are trying to encourage our students and staff to use Gaelic as the common language socially outside of class as well. And second, we are one of the few businesses in Scotland that endeavours to work entirely through the medium of Gaelic.

These two policy goals are quite ambitious, and we do not always succeed, but we do often come close, and we spend a lot of time and money planning and implementing language policy designed to ever strengthen the use of Gaelic at the College. I have been involved in that planning and implementation process for several years now, and in the course of my involvement, I have noted that we run up against this central question again and again: how can we establish Gaelic as the normal language in our small, new Gaelic community? And by 'normal' here, I mean that the norm of language use at the College would be to speak Gaelic. How do we establish and strengthen norms of Gaelic use amongst speakers of different abilities,

backgrounds and confidence, speakers who come to the College with various different language ideologies they have acquired in different socialisation sites, in traditional communities or as learners or as urban Gaelic activists, all with different expectations of diglossic patterns and appropriate use of English and Gaelic together? How do we establish a new language ideology at the College against the always-encroaching and powerful Anglophone ideology that is hegemonic in Britain?

This is not only an important and difficult question for Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, but it is the sort of question that confronts anyone who seeks to restrengthen a threatened language. To revitalise a language, we have to establish a new ideology about the value and use of that language, but I don't believe that we have a clear picture yet of how this process works. Much of my research interest centres on this question, and I have conducted most of this research in Ireland, looking at the circulation of language ideology in new Irish-language communities, in Gaeltachtaí nua, both in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, and specifically, investigating how these communities work to establish norms of Irish-language use, and how they debate, agree on and defend these norms over time.

In this paper, I will discuss just one of these communities, Carntogher, near Maghera in Northern Ireland. I chose Carntogher, in part, because I would like to recommend this initiative as an example of good practice in language development at the community level. I believe that the Carntogher Gaeltacht project represents a model of language revitalisation that would be of interest to other small towns and rural areas in Ireland and Scotland that are working to revitalise Irish or Scottish Gaelic in their own communities. But I also chose Carntogher, because their

stated goal includes the notion of creating a bilingual community, and this project will provide us with a good jump off point for discussing bilingualism as a policy goal in general and what that goal might imply concerning language norms at the micro level.

Carntogher refers to the rural areas to the north and west of Maghera, with the little village of Tirkane as its focus. Maghera is a medium-sized market town on the A6, about an hour by car from Belfast. The Carntogher initiative is being organised by the Carntogher Community Association (Coiste Forbartha Charn Tóchair), a vanguard of successful community activists that live in and around Maghera. Their goal is to reestablish their community as a Gaeltacht within fifty years or two generations, and they define what they mean by a Gaeltacht as a community that is bilingual but that functions predominantly through the medium of the Irish Language, as we read here in their primary objective,

Within two generations or 50 years to develop a bilingual community where the Irish-language becomes the accepted medium of communication of the majority of the community.

(Coiste Forbartha Charn Tóchair agus Glór na nGael, Carn Tóchair 2008: 11)

This is an ambitious goal, and at first glance we would be tempted to dismiss the Gaeltacht project as un-doable. In Ireland, in the 20th century, there have been many more examples of neo-Gaeltacht initiatives that have failed than have succeeded. Nonetheless, after meeting the activists involved, and studying their project, I would suggest that we should take this project seriously. This Gaeltacht revival is not being proposed by a lone individual or a new group, but

by an established group of experienced community development activists that can boast that they have already successfully completed a long and impressive list of community and language development projects. But it is certainly an ambitious goal, and a large part of their task is selling their community on the notion of reviving the Gaeltacht. In the course of my research, I observed the activists spending much time and effort on promoting their project and involved in what Joshua Fishman would call ideological clarification in their community. (Fishman 2001a: 451-458; discussed in Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998, King 2000) In interviews with language activists in the community, I investigated this ideological process.

The definition of a Gaeltacht offered by the Community Association is relatively specific, and it is backed up by an extensive strategy document published by the Community Association that details their vision of a bilingual community. (Coiste Forbartha Charn Tóchair agus Glór na nGael, Carn Tóchair 2008) It is clear from the policy goal we read above, when the Community Association proposes that "the Irish-language becomes the accepted medium of communication of the majority of the community," that they are proposing a new language norm, that Irish will be the normal language of communication in the community, although the community will still be, in some sense, bilingual.

However, the Irish-revival movement in Carntogher is bottom-up and grass-roots to a large degree, and not all Irish language activists in the area are closely connected to the Carntogher Community Association. I conducted interviews with Irish-language activists in the Carntogher area in 2007 and 2008, and in these interviews, I noted that activists at different degrees of

remove from the Community Association understood the notion of a bilingual community as a policy goal in different ways.

These following interviewees are all Irish-language activists who were not closely connected to the Community Association. The first interviewee is somewhat pessimistic about the chances that the Gaeltacht initiative will succeed, and expresses this by drawing a distinction between an Irish-speaking area and a bilingual community,

Well in terms of this becoming an Irish-speaking area again, would you be saying like if people would be turning this area into the majority of people speaking Irish for example, I think that's very, very long term. I would be surprised to see that happen within 50 years. [...] I think at best you can make it bilingual and so when it comes to this area, you know, maybe bilingual is more realistic.

Although it is not clear exactly from this extract how he understands the word bilingual, the interviewee is clear that he understands that bilingual is different from Irish-speaking, and implies somehow less Irish use. If this interviewee believes that the Community Association may be aiming too high, the next interviewee believes that the Community Association is not aiming high enough, but uses a similar distinction between Irish-speaking and bilingual to express her aspirations for the language,

Well, I will be pushing to have a completely Irish-speaking area within 50 years instead of a bilingual area.

I was intrigued by these different understandings of the word bilingual, and where possible, I asked interviewees to elaborate. The following interviewee is describing how she understands the goal of the Gaeltacht project,

TCA: What do you think [the Community Association's] general goal is for the language?

Interviewee: Their goal is to have Irish as... that we will be bilingual, not that we will be an Irish-speaking community, I think they would say that's not realistic, but that we will be bilingual. I think that's what they're aiming for.

TCA: Do you think that they have a specific idea of what bilingual means? Are they shooting for a certain percentage of the population or do they want to see Irish spoken in certain areas of life? What do you think they mean by bilingual?

Interviewee: I think that they mean that they would like to see it generally that people would be as comfortable speaking Irish as English and that they would be able to use it in all aspects.

In my second question, I suggest a couple ways that bilingualism might be understood, demographically or in terms of language use, but the interviewee rejects both these definitions, and instead explains that she understands the goal of bilingualism as speakers generally being comfortable in both languages, and also perhaps, as the opportunity to choose to use either Irish

or English in all aspects of life in the Carntogher area. I will come back to this notion of free choice below, but for now, it is enough to see again, that the interviewee understands that a bilingual community and an Irish-speaking community are two different things, and that this understanding is different from how the Community Association understands the goal of a bilingual community as a Gaeltacht.

The confusion here is clearly with the word bilingual and the concept of social bilingualism. Gaelic/English bilingualism is not only a policy goal advanced in this small community, but in one form or another, it is also a frequently cited policy goal in Scotland and Ireland at all levels: in families, businesses, schools and universities, voluntary organisations and governmental bodies both local and national. In the case of the strategy document under special consideration in this volume, the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language, the words bilingual and bilingualism appear frequently throughout the document. In the prospectus for the conference that preceded the papers in this volume, I detect some unease with bilingualism as a policy goal, a sense, perhaps, that bilingualism is underspecified and could make for weak policy as a result. The relevant section of the prospectus reads,

Repeatedly, throughout the Strategy draft, the notion of **bilingualism** is raised, but is it a policy for bilingualism which lies behind the Strategy, and if so what is that Policy? In the context of the Strategy, what does it mean to be bilingual? If a truly bilingual Ireland is to be achieved, what are the key elements needed to bring it about? The Strategy may be a springboard for bilingualism, but it isn't a mission statement as there are many implications not spelled out, and many weak links. (emphasis in the original)

My research in Carntogher would confirm that bilingualism as a policy goal is problematic and that social bilingualism is understood in a range of sometimes contradictory ways. In the course of my research, I witnessed the activists on the Carntogher Community Association doing an admirable job of clarifying their goals and promoting their project to their community. However, we can see from the data I presented here that there is still some confusion, and that not all Irish-language activists in the community understand bilingualism in the same way as it is understood in the strategy documents published by the Community Association. I would say that the Community Association are doing the right thing and clarifying what they mean by bilingual with reference to specific norms of language use. And hopefully, over time, as they continue working on ideological clarification in their community, this linkage between bilingualism and specific norms of Irish use will become generally clearer to all.

The problem is that unless this linkage is made, bilingualism is underspecified and is a poor policy goal in this respect. I would suggest that it may be time to reassess bilingualism as a policy goal in Ireland and in Scotland at all levels. Bilingualism is often understood as a choice between two languages in a given situation, or in society as a whole. Citizens are imagined as linguistic consumers who can choose to live their lives in Gaelic or English, or a mix of both. This neo-liberal notion of free choice may sit more comfortably next to ideologies of civic nationalism, but it fails to describe how languages are actually used in a multilingual and multiglossic society. (Petrovic 2005, McEwan-Fujita 2005) In actual practice, language use is rarely a matter of free choice alone. (Clayton 2008) The choices we make about the languages we use are tightly structured by powerful linguistic norms. As a dominant ideology, the

Anglophone ideology of English use in Britain and Ireland has been naturalised, de-historicised and de-politicised to the extent that it is largely invisible to social actors from day to day, but it nonetheless compels us to use English in most situations. Unless there are some situations or sites where Irish use and Scottish Gaelic use are made the accepted norms, the languages will not be spoken.

As an illustration of the role of norms in language revitalisation, consider two successes of the Scottish Gaelic Revival: BBC Radio nan Gàidheal (Cormack 2004) and Gaelic-medium primary education (NicNeacail and MacÌomhair 2007, O'Hanlon 2010). These two projects are both successful by at least two different measures. They have a teleologic value in that they provide important services in Gaelic, namely, broadcasting in Gaelic and educating children in Gaelic. But they also have an intrinsic value in that they open up new sites of Gaelic use and this further strengthens Gaelic as a normalised spoken language in everyday life. In other words, by this intrinsic measure, they are successful insofar as they establish new Gaelic language norms. Of course, in both cases, there is an element of choice involved. Where the service is available, listeners can choose to tune into Radio nan Gàidheal or not, and where a Gaelic unit is available, parents can choose to have their children educated in Gaelic or not. And further, depending on qualifications and employment opportunities, teachers and radio presenters may have a choice to work in the Gaelic sector or not. But when it comes to the sites of language use themselves, there is no choice. In both cases, a new Gaelic language norm has been established and is daily defended. Undoubtedly, most presenters on Radio nan Gàidheal agree with the Gaelic language ideology of the station and willingly speak Gaelic on air, but nonetheless, their use of Gaelic in that specific situation is not subject to their own personal choice. If a Radio nan Gàidheal

presenter chose to broadcast in English, she would be told to return to speaking Gaelic on air or find a new job. So too, if a teacher of a Gaelic-medium class chose to speak primarily in English to his students, he would eventually be told to return to teaching in Gaelic or find a post teaching an English-medium class. Teleologic value is typically a measure of the value of the explicit purpose of a project, and therefore it is not surprising that when we evaluate revival and revitalisation projects, we tend to pay greater attention to the projects' teleologic value than the projects' intrinsic value in establishing new norms. However, I suspect that if we were to closely examine different successful language revival and revitalisation projects from around the world, we would find that many or even most of these projects are successful *because* they establish new language norms in strategic sites or situations.

In this paper I am focusing on the question of norms and social bilingualism, but social bilingualism also implies some degree of individual bilingualism, and just as a bilingual policy can be ambiguous concerning expectations of language use, it can also be ambiguous concerning expectations of language ability. If an organisation or a polity subscribes to a policy of bilingualism, who will be expected to know which languages and to what degree? Is it always clear, and if it is not clear, what is happening behind that unclarity? Will everyone be expected to acquire both languages, or as is often the case, will ability in only one language, the dominant language, be required of all members, and what then does this say about the relative status of the threatened language and the relative power of its speakers? In popular and political discourse, a bilingual policy may be understood as a commitment to treat both languages equally and all speakers fairly, but this can be a further point of confusion. If in practice a bilingual policy implicitly sanctions unidirectional bilingualism (Fishman 2001b: 9) and therefore sanctions the

continuing privilege of monolingual speakers of the dominant language, then the two languages will not have equal status. In this way, the potential unclarity of bilingualism as a policy goal can mask unequal power and privilege based on language.

I would suggest that, in place of bilingualism, or perhaps, in addition to bilingualism, it may be time to reconsider an older policy goal, and that is restoration. In the Irish context, restoration and bilingualism are often understood as opposing meta-policies, (cf. Ó Croidheáin 2006: 131-263; Ó Laoire 2005: 258-278), but in practice, each contains the other. For example, even if Irish was restored as the normal language in most domains in the Republic of Ireland, the Republic would certainly remain to some extent a bilingual, or indeed, a multilingual society. Johann Gottfried von Herder's (2002) conception of the nation as a single culture with a single language is deeply embedded in the ideology of nationalism in Europe (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998, Dorian 1998), but we now understand that the truly monolingual polity is a rare anomaly and that language contact and social multilingualism are overwhelmingly the rule (Aikhenvald 2002). And at the same time, as I am arguing here, any meaningful definition of sustainable social bilingualism implies the restoration of Irish as the normal means of communication in some domains, situations or sites.

I would argue that restoration may be a useful policy goal, both in Ireland and in Scotland, because it foregrounds the question, where? Where will Irish be restored? Where will Scottish Gaelic be restored? And where will English remain the dominant language? The danger with bilingualism is that it is so underspecified, it elides the question of where specifically minority languages will be used. If we are going to restore the use of Irish or Scottish Gaelic, we should

ask, where, when, in what specific sites or situations will Irish or Scottish Gaelic be used as the normal means of communication? In a multilingual society and in the context of multiple contested language ideologies, the question of what norms of language use will apply in what situations can be sensitive and politically difficult, and we might be tempted to postpone the debate with deliberately vague policy goals. But while this question might be postponed, if the debate on norms and goals is put off indefinitely, the dominant, naturalised, default language ideology will inevitably prevail.

Effective language planning is about attending to actual language use above all else: asking at each stage of the planning process how a given strategy, initiative or development will lead to real use of the language. Restoration as a policy goal is valuable because it emphasises norms of language use and encourages us to ask in concrete detail where and how norms of minority language use will be established and defended.

Acknowledgments

This paper is based on research undertaken in the pursuit of a PhD and I would like to thank my advisors, Iain Mac an Tàilleir, Dr. Meg Bateman and Dr. John Walsh, as well as my examiners, Dr. Gillian Rothach and Professor Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh, for their assistance and advice. I would also like to thank Niall Ó Catháin and Liz NicIllEathain who commented on a draft of this paper. This research was made possible by a generous grant from the trustees of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

- Aikhenvald, A. Y. 2002. "Traditional Multilingualism and Language Endangerment". In eds. D. and M. Bradley. *Language Endangerment and Language Maintenance*. London: RoutledgeCurzon. 24-33
- Blommaert, J. and Verschueren, J. 1998. "The Role of Language in European Nationalist Ideologies". In eds. B. B. Schieffelin, K. A. Woolard and P. V. Kroskrity. *Language Ideologies, Practice and Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 189-210
- Clayton, S. 2008. "The problem of 'choice' and the construction of the demand for English in Cambodia". *Language Policy* 7(2): 143–164
- Coiste Forbartha Charn Tóchair agus Glór na nGael, Carn Tóchair. 2008. *An Bealach Chun Tosaigh; Straitéis don Ghaeilge i gCarn Tóchair agus i Machaire Rátha*. www.ancarn.org/projects/language-development/strateis-22.pdf, retrieved: 29-9-2010
- Cormack, M. 2004. "Gaelic in the Media." *Scottish Affairs* 46: 23-43
- Dauenhauer, N. M. and Dauenhauer, R. 1998. "Technical, emotional, and ideological issues in reversing language shift: examples from Southeast Alaska". In eds. L. A. Grenoble and L. J. Whaley. *Endangered Languages, Current issues and future prospect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 57-98
- Dorian, N. C. 1998. "Western language ideologies and small-language prospects". In eds. L. A. Grenoble and L. J. Whaley. *Endangered Languages, Current issues and future prospect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 3-21
- Fishman, J. A. 2001a. "From Theory to Practice (and Vice Versa): Review, Reconsideration and Reiteration". In ed. J. A. Fishman. *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved?* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd. 451-483

- Fishman, J. A. 2001b. "Why is it so Hard to Save a Threatened Language?" In ed. J. A. Fishman. *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved?* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd. 1-22
- Herder, J. G. 2002. *Philosophical Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- King, K. A. 2000. "Language Ideologies and Heritage Language Education". *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 3(3): 167-184
- Kroskrity, P. V. 2004. "Language Ideologies". In ed. A. Durant. *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 496-517
- McEwan-Fujita, E. 2005. "Neoliberalism and minority-language planning in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland". *The International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 171: 155-171
- NicNeacail, M. and MacÌomhair, M.M eds. 2007. *Foghlam tro Mheadhan na Gàidhlig*. Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press
- Ó Croidheáin, C. 2006. *Language from Below, The Irish Language Ideology and Power in 20th Century Ireland*. Oxford: Peter Lang
- O'Hanlon, F. 2010. "Gaelic-medium Primary Education in Scotland: Towards a New Taxonomy?" In eds. G. Munro and I. Mac an Tàilleir. *Coimhearsnachd na Gàidhlig an-Diugh/Gaelic Communities Today*. Edinburgh: Dunedin. 99-116
- Ó Laoire, M. 2005. "The Language Planning Situation in Ireland". *Current Issues in Language Planning* 6(3): 251-314
- Petrovic, J. E. 2005. "The Conservative Restoration and Neoliberal Defenses of Bilingual Education". *Language Policy* 4: 395-416
- Woolard, K. A. and Schieffelin, B. B. 1994. "Language Ideology". *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23: 55-82