The language planning policy in Ireland and Irish-language books: A hundred year perspective

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Abstract

An element of a nation's state policy is to support the use of a particular language or languages while prohibiting the use of other languages or their varieties in certain situations – usually formal. This is in the realm of language planning of which there are two basic types. Corpus planning involves establishing a standard language and promoting it among the language users. Status planning supports the use of a particular language through granting it the status of official language or auxiliary language in a given state or region, most often in the spheres of education, administration, services and media. This article discusses the Irish-language book in the context of language planning in Ireland. Particular observations are made from a perspective of a hundred years after most of Ireland seceded from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland to form an autonomous state (1922), which required the establishment of new national policies.

Keywords

Książka irlandzkojęzyczna w kontekście polityki planowania językowego w Irlandii z perspektywy stu lat

Abstrakt

Jednym z elementów polityki państwa jest wspieranie użycia określonego języka lub języków, a zarazem zakazywanie lub zniechęcanie do używania innych języków lub odmian językowych w pewnych, najczęściej oficjalnych, sytuacjach. Działania te mieszczą się w praktyce planowania językowego, w którym rozróżniamy dwa podstawowe typy. Planowanie korpusu polega na tworzeniu standardu języka oraz na rozpowszechnianiu go wśród użytkowników. Planowanie statusu wspiera używanie danego języka i najczęściej łączy się z nadaniem mu statusu języka urzędowego lub pomocniczego w państwie lub jego regionie, zazwyczaj w sferze edukacji, administracji, usług i środków przekazu. Artykuł omawia książkę irlandzkojęzyczną w kontekście planowania językowego w Irlandii. Sytuacja w Irlandii opisywana jest z perspektywy stu lat po oderwaniu się jej większej części od Zjednoczonego Królestwa Wielkiej Brytanii i Irlandii i ustanowieniu irlandzkiej państwowości w 1922 roku, co pociągnęło za sobą implementację polityki narodowej.

Słowa kluczowe

książka irlandzka, planowanie językowe, język irlandzki, polityka językowa

1. Introduction

On December 6th, 1921, in London, the Anglo-Irish Treaty (Articles of Agreement for a Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland) was signed by the representatives of the government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and a delegation of Dáil Éireann, the illegal nationalist assembly or parliament of Ireland which had been set up in Dublin in 1919. The Treaty concluded the Irish War of Independence and

provided for the foundation of the Irish Free State (1922–1937). It did not establish an independent state consisting of the whole Ireland, which Irish republicans had fought for, as six of the nine counties of Ulster, called Northern Ireland, remained under the British crown. However, it was not so much the partitioning of the island as the abandonment of the ideal of a republic and the oath of allegiance to the crown which members of the new parliament were obliged to take that generated a bitter debate in the Dáil (Ó hEithir 1997: 64) eventually leading to the Irish civil war between the two nationalist factions, ended in 1923 with the declaration of a ceasefire on behalf of the anti-treaty forces. From the very beginning, it was clear that the acceptance of dominion status was seen by a majority of Dáil Éireann as "the best compromise available, and as an alternate to the resumption of war with Britain"; however, it was also "conditioned by the belief, on the part of the Irish leaders who accepted it, that it was a stepping stone to independence" (Sweeney 1944: 183–184). Despite the oath of allegiance to the British crown, removed by the 1937 Constitution, which replaced the British monarch with the president (an tUachtarán) as head of state, the government of the Irish Free State could exercise considerable freedom and implement, among other things, new cultural policies, including language planning. This article addresses this issue and focuses on the production of Irish-language books subsidised by the government of the Free State as part of the implementation of the accepted language policy.

2. Sociolinguistic context

In the eighteenth century, due to the politically motivated process of the Anglicisation of Ireland, strengthened with the introduction of the anti-Catholic penal laws, Irish society was already divided into the smaller but more powerful ruling class of Protestant English-speakers and the disenfranchised

and dispossessed Catholics, who spoke Irish. Although, "the drift was strongly in favour of English, a knowledge of which was essential to socio-economic advancement" (Welch 1997: 265), it was the poorest class of native Irish-speakers that grew in number to reach over four million in the first decades of the nineteenth century, which could be circa 80 per cent of the population. However, as pointed out by Aidan Doyle (2015: 129), it is certain that many parents who knew Irish and spoke it to people of their generation, did not pass it on to their children and so it is likely that only "45 per cent reflects the real situation at the beginning of the nineteenth century." In the second half of this century, the social upheaval following the Great Famine (1845–1848) and the mass emigration of the native Irish from Ireland, which decimated their communities and necessitated their learning English, caused a massive language change. English in Ireland became for most people the primary medium of spoken and written communication; Irish, then favoured by about a quarter of the population, continued to be used mostly by older, often illiterate people from disadvantaged classes in peripheral areas (Ó Murchú 1999: 10). However, it was the peripherality of the Irish language that helped it survive because the language shift "slowed as it encountered around the western seaboard the densely populated areas, officially at the time known as 'congested districts', in which communities […] had little access to competence in English" (Welch 1997: 266). In these areas, which are now collectively referred to as the Gaeltacht, the Irish-speaking tradition continued. Another important factor that prevented Irish from dying was a vigorous Irish-language restoration movement which developed at the end of the nineteenth century within the wider Irish (cultural) Revival.

3. Cultural context

The phrase Irish Revival refers principally to the movements in literature and language in Ireland in the three decades from the death of Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–1891), the Leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, in 1891 to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, although this phenomenon was also evident in art, design, music, and sport. As rightly pointed out by John Strachan and Claire Nally (2012: 4), at that time almost every aspect of Irish culture was immersed in national significance and Breandán Ó hEithir (1997: 51–52) notes that "[i]n general the emphasis was on things that marked Ireland as different from England." The cultural revival was to support the Irish people's believe that Ireland should be run by the people of Ireland and to reinforce their struggle for independence. In sport, the Irish games of hurling and Gaelic football were promoted; in the area of Irish literature in English, the works by such writers as Lady Gregory (1852–1932), Standish James O'Grady (1846–1928), John Millington Synge (1871–1909) or, most notably, Nobel Prize winning William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) explored and exploited the old Irish sagas and native folk tales; in the field of languages, Irish was restored as the national language of Irish people. The latter task was carried out by Irish language organisations of which the most active was the Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge) founded in 1893. Its first president was Douglas Hyde (1860–1949), an Irish linguist, academic and politician, who later served as the first President of Ireland, 1938–1945. In his famous lecture "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland" (1892, online), Hyde considered the loss of the Irish language to be the sorest stroke that the rapid Anglicisation had inflicted upon Irish people and called for arresting this language's decay and bringing pressure upon Irish politicians "not to snuff it out by their tacit discouragement merely because they do not happen themselves to understand it." With such an attitude in mind the members of the Gaelic League prepared the ground for the language policy of the future Free State.

The aims of the Gaelic League, as expressed in its early pamphlet (1896), were "the preservation of Irish as a national language and the extension of its use as a spoken tongue; and the study and publication of existing Gaelic literature and the cultivation of a modern literature in Irish" (Purdon 1999: 37). The source of the living national language was obviously the regions of the Gaeltacht. There, however, different dialects were spoken and – due to the British system of education introduced throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in the1830s and, what followed it, classes taught solely through the medium of English – many native speakers of the Irish language were illiterate in that language. There were obviously native speakers of Irish who could serve as teachers with linguistic authority but they needed to be trained in methodology. Training teachers was provided at intensive courses run in special colleges opened by the Gaelic League and so, soon Irish was introduced initially as an extra and subsequently as an ordinary subject in some primary schools (Ó Tuathaigh 2008: 26–27), adults' classes were organised and the learning of Irish was promoted at the festivals of music, verse and dancing which were sponsored by the Gaelic League. Since 1897 the League held the Oireachtas, i.e. the festival solely "on behalf of the Irish language", whose program included competitions for modern short stories in Irish, which would be suitable for publication in a Proceedings volume (Purdon 1999: 47) or *The Weekly Freeman*, the oldest nationalist newspaper in Dublin (Mac Eoin 1969: 58–59). "In themselves," writes Gearóid Mac Eoin (1969: 59), "the stories were not important and are never read today, but they were the first swallows of what was to be a good summer." After many decades when almost no literature was published in Irish (Ó Ciosáin 2004: 5), they – like all other works of modern Irish-language literature, such as *Séadna* (1904), the very popular novel by Peadar Ua Laoghaire (1839–1920) – were crucial for the development of the new literary language, based on the living speech of the people – *caint na ndaoine* but without the irregularities and roughness typical of everyday conversation.

Although it was in the sphere of education that the Gaelic League was most successful, its attempts to encourage the creation of a new literature cannot be ignored. What is more, the Gaelic League's publications were accompanied by debates about the possible forms of the new literary language and a print culture in Irish, which paved the way for language planning in the Irish Free State.

4. Language planning – a term and a task

Einar Haugen (1959: 8) defined language planning as "an activity of preparing a normative orthography, grammar and dictionary for the guidance of writers and speakers in a non-homogenous speech community." This definition would now be considered to be of corpus planning and differentiated from what is called status planning, the distinction made by Heinz Kloss (1969: 81) in his report of the possibilities of research into group bilingualism:

> The big difference between corpus and status planning is that the former cannot be done with the help of some specialists, chiefly linguists and writers, who are called upon to form an academy, commission or some other official or semiofficial body within the framework of which they are expected to do some long-range team-work. No such separate set-up, as a rule can take place, for status planning. This is done by statesmen and bureaucrats as part of their routine work, mostly with some legal but with very little sociolinguistic background.

So, in short, two dimensions of language planning are traditionally talked about:

> Corpus planning [which] deals with norm selection and codification, as the writing of grammars and the standardization of spelling [and] status planning [which] deals with initial choice of language, including attitudes toward alternative languages and the political implications of various choices. (Bright 1992: 311)

Yet, Robert L. Cooper (1989, cited in "Language Planning
& Policy") adds language acquisition planning to it as a third
major type of planning, important particularly in education,
which includes decisions as to which languages are to be used
as mediums of instruction.

It seems that both corpus and acquisition planning are re-
lated to or even usually result from status planning. If the status
of a language is raised to official level in a state, it may be used
at least at some, if not all, levels of education and this requires
its standardisation, which becomes a task supervised, and often
subsidised, by this state's government. This is how it transpired
in Ireland when the Irish language received its constitutional
official status in the Irish Free State.

5. Languages in Irish Constitutions

It is reported that numerous foreign journalists present at the
sitting of the first Dáil, on January 21st, 1919, were surprised
that the proceedings were carried out through the Irish lan-
guage, which only a few could understand ("The Irish Language
in the Oireachtas"). There is, however, no reference to the status
of the Irish language in Ireland in the Constitution of Dáil
Éireann (referred to below as: the Dáil Constitution), which was
adopted on that day and remained "the basic law of the embry-
onic Irish state until the introduction of the Irish Free [State]
Constitution" in 1922 (Farrel 1969: 127). The Dáil Constitution
is a simple, direct document of only five short articles that
sketch a provisional scheme of the (illegal) government (Farrel
1969: 135–136) set up by the members of the nationalist party
Sinn Féin, who had won a general election in Ireland in 1918.
In its case, specifying legislative or executive powers in Ireland
seemed more important that the formal recognition of the status
of the Irish language, the attitude to which could be simply
manifested in practice, for example at sittings of the Dáil. It is,
however, worth mentioning that the Dáil soon appointed its
translator. This function was assumed by Micheál Ó Loingsigh

(1883–1942) (Cronin 1996: 153), who was later put in charge of an official translation service established by the government of the Free Irish State ("The Irish Language in the Oireachtas").

The appointment of a Dáil translator and, later, the establishment of the official translation service by the government of the Free State, indicated that in Ireland two languages were to be officially used. This was expressed directly in Article 4 of the Constitution of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Eireann) Act, 1922:

> The National language of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Eireann) is the Irish language, but the English language shall be equally recognised as an official language. Nothing in this Article shall prevent special provisions being made by the Parliament of the Irish Free State (otherwise called and herein generally referred to as the "Oireachtas") for districts or areas in which only one language is in general use.

Tomás Ó Máille (1990: 8) comments on Article 4 in the following way:

> The declaration by the Constitution that the National language of the Saorstát is the Irish language does not mean that the Irish language is, or was at that historical moment, universally spoken by the people of the Saorstát, which would be untrue in fact, but it did mean that it is a historic distinctive speech of the Irish people, that it is to rank as such in the nation, and, by implication, that the State is bound to everything within its sphere of action (as for instance in State-provided education) to establish and maintain it in its status as the National language and to recognise it for all official purposes as the National language. There is no doubt in my mind but that the term 'National' in the Article is wider than, but includes, 'official', in which respect only the English language is accorded constitutional equality.

Despite Ireland becoming officially bilingual, giving prominence to a language other than English was unique among Commonwealth countries (Walsh 2011: 41). It was significant that the new Constitution gave Irish official status "as an important

symbol of Irish identity as cultural nationalism took on the role of official state ideology" (Ó Croidheáin 2006: 170). Similarly to the Irish Constitution of 1937 (still in operation), which repeated and even strengthened the status of Irish, the Free State Constitution placed "positive obligations on the state to maintain and promote the status of the Irish language as the national language, including through areas such as the educational system" (Mac Giolla Chriost 2005: 119). This entailed the obligation of corpus planning and standardising the literary language to be used in print.

6. Irish-language books

Giving Irish its constitutional status of national language and of one of the two official languages in the Free State was part of its government's status language planning policy. This necessitated acquisition and corpus planning, for which the ground had been partially prepared by the Gaelic League. The organisation's most significant achievements were in the areas of education, where it had educated a number of teachers able to teach in new state schools, as well as of literature, where, after prolonged debates concerning the form of language to be used, the decision was taken in favour of *caint na ndaoine*. Yet, the Gaelic League had not resolved many specific problems, which now had to be faced by the government of the new state – no form of grammar or orthography to be referred to had been created and no type of script had been chosen to be used in printed literature.

    The need for the use of two official languages made the government establish the Translation Section of the Oireachtas [the houses of Irish parliament], called Rannóg an Aistriúcháin, responsible for translating the Acts of the Oireachtas from 1922 onwards, the translation conducted mainly from English to Irish. One of the initial aims of the Rannóg an Aistriúcháin was to create a standard of Irish to be used by the state service whose duties required them to write Irish. It was gradually compiled

and published as *Gramadach na Gaeilge: Caighdeán Rannóg an Aistriúcháin* [*The Grammar of Irish: The Standard of Rannóg an Aistriúcháin*] in 1953. Brian Ó Cuív (1969: 33) points out that "it encouraged those concerned with it to issue a revised edition [*Gramadach na Gaeilge agus Litriú na Gaeilge: An Caighdeán Oifigiúil – The Grammar and Spelling of Irish: The Official Standard* (1958), which included also the new standard of Irish orthography] with a view to its providing a basis or a guide for teachers and for writers generally." According to this scholar, in 1969 Ireland appeared to be only "at the beginning of a new age of standard literary Irish." To him it was clear that neither the spelling nor the grammar of the official standard could accommodate all the existing variations of Irish. As a result, it did not come to represent any of them, yet, "with very minor revisions in the 1960 and 1979 [it] remains the written standard for Irish" (Nic Pháidín 2008: 102).

Such a – as it seems – late introduction of the official standard did not mean that no literature in Irish had been published in the Irish State. On the contrary, in 1926, the educational needs of teachers and students at schools where Irish was compulsory as well as the existence of a new adult readership led the government to establish An Gúm, a state publishing arm developed especially to satisfy these demands. Eleven years later Roibeárd Ó Faracháin (1937: 170) was to sum it up in the following words:

> the Government of Saorstát Éireann had a brain-wave for the benefit of literature in Irish. Rather […] one Minister of that Government, Earnán de Blaghd, had a brainwave. He saw that the publication of books in Irish was a business about which two things could be said certainly: that it was a vital need, and that it was moribund. One thing could save its life: subsidy. Whence the scheme popularly known as An Gúm.

According to León Ó Broin (1938: 126), "[t]o meet the situation created by the State assuming the leadership in the language revival, it was inevitable that the State should become itself

a publisher" but An Gúm, with which he himself collaborated as a writer and translator, was more than that – it "[did not wait] for the books to come along [but went] out of its way to get them, planning and subsidising all the stages preliminary to the acceptance of manuscript." The author points out that the state publisher was interested not only in school books but the whole range of contemporary literature. It was obvious that since there was no officially-accepted and imposed standard of Irish, creative Irish writers used regional varieties, however, considerable editorial work was done to their texts (and texts' language) before they got published.

Niall Ó Ciosáin and Clare Hutton (2010: 197) notice that "the state's support for Irish-language publishing went hand in hand with its enthusiasm for censorship: both initiatives involved the desire to control and direct the evolution of national book culture." A detailed study of An Gúm's publications that appeared in the Free State (Cisło 2018: 113–130 & 147–152) even gives the impression that more attention was paid to moral aspects of publications than to other matters, including the form of printed Irish. One of the problems that had not been resolved by the Gaelic League was the choice between the use of Roman and Gaelic types. In the latter one the fonts reproduce the shape of letters from Irish medieval manuscripts. Different variants of Irish types had been used in print since the 17th century but, at the same time, Roman type had also been used in printed Irish. In the Irish Revival period many language enthusiasts from the circles of the Gaelic League claimed that Gaelic fonts should be employed in print for patriotic reasons even if using them was more expensive and, as such, less practical (McGuinne 2010: 188). Indeed, most publications of the Gaelic League were issued in Irish characters. Yet, in the Free State "there was a tendency from the outset to use Roman type" (Ó Cuív 1969: 26), which was related to the costs of the use of two types of fonts (Roman necessary for printing English texts) both in printed and typewritten materials. In 1924 the Executive Council decided that Roman type was to be used generally

throughout the Civil Service except for Intermediate Examina-
tion papers, where Gaelic lettering was to continue as long as
text books were printed in that manner (Ó Cearúil 1999: 27).
Then, when An Gúm was established as a publishing arm of the
Department of Education, numerous, if not most of, the books
published under the auspices of the government of the Free
State employed Gaelic characters, not Roman. This might have
been because the conservative opposition to the use of the latter
continued – in 1928 the Gaelic League even passed a resolution
that "it [was] better for Irish that no great change be made in
the type or the spelling of Irish until the language [was] out of
danger of death or destruction" (Ó Cuív 1969: 29). Also for this
reason printed literature featured many outmoded spelling and
word forms.

7. Critical views

Critical views of An Gúm had appeared already within the first
ten years of its activity. The state publisher was criticised for
the poor quality of its publications, which related both to their
physical form – like poor quality paper – and language level – in
Ó Faracháin's (1937: 170) opinion, many original Irish-language
books "would not have a chance of reaching print if they were
written in English", and Micheál Mag Ruaidhrí (cited in O'Leary
2004: 508) went even further saying that as to most of these
books "the Irish language would be better off had they never
been published at all" and that it was „certain that more harm
than good [would] come as a result of publishing them". It was
criticised for imposing strict censorship as well as the introduc-
tion of the so-called translation scheme (1928), which was to
tackle the shortage of original Irish-language works. The great
number of translations that appeared within this scheme in-
cluded books hardly ever read as they were easily available in
English: "money have been largely wasted," wrote O'Neill (1946:
136–137, "readers of Irish will not read translations of books
which they can easily procure in English". Such arguments were

balanced by other opinions, like the one expressed by Ó Broin (1938: 128):

> Most of these translations are from English, for the simple reason that sufficient translators could not be found at the time who could read any other language, but that very fact was sufficient to damn the scheme in some people's eyes. Why, they asked, should be expected to read English novels in translation when they could read them in the original? The proper answer to that question is that the translations were made available primarily for Gaeltacht-born people who, if things were natural, should be able to read Irish with greater facility than English.

8. Conclusion

Gearóidín Uí Laighléis (2007: 205) reports that "by 1937 [An Gúm] had published 362 texts altogether, 169 of these being translations" and adds that "[o]f the first 100 works of fiction published, approximately 60% were translations." Summing up the early activity of An Gúm, she calls it "an honest attempt to provide reading material in Irish" and states that "most worthwhile literature in Irish written in the 1920s and 30s was published by the Gúm" (Uí Laighléis 2007: 216). Indeed, it was under the auspices of this publisher that, for example, the works by Tomás Ó Criomhthain (1855/6–1937) and Peig Sayers (1873–1958) appeared, which belong to the canon of Irish-language literature. It shall be also remembered that the scheme was set up by the Department of Education when it was seen that textbooks and books for general reading were required on a scale beyond the capacity of any existing commercial publishing house, and so it had to be involved in acquisition planning. Now, when An Gúm has undoubtedly been the biggest Irish language publisher ever, taken its past and present educational bias, it is clear this function has been fulfilled. An Gúm was criticised for not caring for the quality of the language in which the books were published but in the Free State there was no officially accepted standard of Irish to be referred to. At the same

time, as pointed out by Nic Pháidin (2008: 104), An Gúm did contribute to the development of terminology, which took place in response to demand from education: "By 1939. Some ninety-nine novels mainly of English literature, had been translated by Irish-language authors including such works as *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells, with a consequent use of new terminology." This partially indicates the role of An Gúm publishing in corpus planning. From the perspective of a hundred years the initiative seems unrivalled and even if it was to be regarded solely as instrumental – preparing the ground for the flowering of later literature in Irish, An Gúm's publications should be appreciated at least as still more of what Mac Eoin called "the first swallows of what was to be a good summer".

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