Irish Language as a Part of Cultural Identity of the Irish

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Abstract
Language can be perceived as a crucial part of identity. Language enables to pass on experience which is vital for future generations. Language and culture are mutually interconnected. The principal aim of the article is analysis of the importance of Irish language in the context of cultural identity of the Irish. Specifically, we deal with the topical issues concerning language and identity referring to Crystal´s theory of language death. Last but not least we also focus on the renaissance of Irish language in the Republic of Ireland dealing with selected official documents and strategies aimed at cultivation and preservation of the Irish language in the Republic of Ireland.

Keywords: language; identity; cultural identity; Irish language; language death; revival of Irish language.

Introduction

Language can be perceived as a crucial part of identity, either of cultural, national or European one. According to Schröder language provides a fertile ground for identification, it is linked to collective consciousness (historical consciousness) [12]. Language enables to pass on experience which is also vital for future generations. There are many opinions about interconnection of language and culture. Crystal states that there are two points of view regarding interconnection of language and culture [2]. The first point of view is connected with the fact that there is a considerable identity between culture and language. Culture is expressed by language (held mostly by indigenous language speakers). The second point of view stipulates that there is limited identity between language and culture and that language is just an optional feature of ethnicity not an obligatory one. The second point of view also embodies the statement that even if people do not speak indigenous language, they can be part of community (that is also the case of the Irish who do not speak Irish language but still they feel like being part of Irish community).

Pombeni gives us a rather rhetorical question of what can be more unrelinquishable than language. He assumes that the language is drunk in a mother´s milk without us actually knowing it emphasizing thus language as a primordial element [10].

Language Death

As for the linguistic diversity and protection of regional and minority languages, one should also pay closer attention to the topic of language death mentioned by many authors [12]. In the words of Crystal, languages can be classified into several groups according to the number of their speakers and thus their viability [2]. Therefore, they are divided into viable languages, viable but small (Irish language), endangered languages, nearly extinct languages and extinct languages (Cornish and Manx languages). Weaker languages can be further divided according to Wurm into endangered languages with few or no children learning the language, seriously endangered, moribund languages and extinct languages [2].

Following Schröder language and culture are inextricably linked together although they should not be equated. When a language dies, then the culture of the people who speak the given language is also lost [12]. The language and culture can both die. The death of one of them implies the death of the other. Therefore, they are mutually interconnected and the artificial preservation (in museums and other, cultural institutions) cannot substitute the great loss of language. This is the case of the previously mentioned Cornish (spoken in Cornwall – situated in the western end of

England) and Manx (spoken on the Isle of Man) languages. The former became extinct in the 19th century and the latter in the 20th century (1891, 1974) [3].

In the case of the Irish language (also called Irish Gaelig), the language death was almost achieved by the English policy of supplanting the Irish language with English. Elizabethan officials in Ireland believed e.g. that Gaelic bred sedition [3]. Moreover, during the Victorian era, the Irish were viewed as backward and inferior. There were many stereotypes used depicting the Irish as wild, reckless, indolent which was hostile view towards Irish being based on negative Celtic Irish stereotype [9].

Furthermore, the Irish Gaelic, one of the two official languages of the Republic of Ireland, is considered by many as the supreme embodiment of independent Irish-Celtic culture. Nowadays it is threatened with extinction (belonging to a group of endangered languages). The Irish as well as other Celtic languages have got a few similarities together and one of them is connected with their geographical delineation which means that they are all confined to mountainous or coastal areas (Scottish Gaelic – Highlands, Irish Gaelic – Gaeltacht areas) which is also one of the reasons why it should be supported countrywide supposing that language and culture are conceived as part and parcel of an ecological approach towards society [12]. In this way, the term ecology is no longer confined only to biology and environmental studies but also to social sciences.

IRISH LANGUAGE
Origin of the Irish Language

Origin of the Irish Gaelic is connected with the arrival of the Celts on the British Isles. It became a written language in the period of early Middle Ages. It was even earlier than Latin which was dominant until 13th and 14th century. From that time on other national languages gained also dominant role. However, a great number of medieval languages declined like the Irish language or Welsh language etc., because of the policy of language homogenization which was realized since the 16th century as a consequence of central power of a ruler, centralism and bureaucracy. In such a way a ruler could perform absolutist efforts for unification which was realized by the policy of plantation i.e. migration and settlement of English in parts of Ireland and Wales [3].

The main aim of unification was to unite countries legally, religiously but also linguistically. This central language homogeneity equaled to one state language (in the case of Ireland it was the English language). Thus, the dominant nation speaking the dominant language was superior to other non-governing ethnic groups. It was also believed that dialects could be a danger for state organism. That is also one of the reasons why the Irish (as well as the Scottish) rebelled against language unification (assimilation) policy of the English. Therefore, for the Irish the language played not only a role of having a simple communicative function but also the symbolic one as well as the function inevitable for self-identification or more precisely for a contrastive self-identification of non-governing ethnic group against others [4].

Although the Irish language declined since the 17th century it is still part of ethnic identity of the Irish, even of those Irish who do not speak their original language anymore. The loss of the Irish language thus is not equal to the loss of their ethnic identity [5].

Renaissance of Irish Gaelic in the Republic of Ireland

The national renaissance of Irish language in the Republic of Ireland has become of crucial importance for national and cultural identification of the Irish. As a consequence it acquired the role of an important subject on school and university curricula which was also helped by the state policy. People became gradually encouraged to learn the language. The knowledge of Irish has played a significant role during work selection procedures since then. The Irish language thus can be perceived as an important element in terms of cultural-identity fostering in Ireland. It means that the Irish language is intended to be transmitted to all parts of Ireland (in order not to be confined only to western coastal areas known as Gaeltachts) [12].

The Irish language nowadays is preferred by the Irish in many respects. Firstly, as it was previously mentioned, Irish language education is supported in Irish schools throughout the Republic of Ireland as well as in Northern Ireland. Secondly, the Irish prefer giving their children Irish equivalents of English names (Sean instead of John, Aine instead of Anne, Padraig instead of Patrick, Cait instead of Kate, etc.), prefer their cultural traditions, feasts, cultural activities as

ethnic music, dance, newspapers, values, etc., which also demonstrates integrative – differential function of culture [6]. The preference of Welsh names instead of English ones is also typical for Wales [11].

As for the number of Irish speaker nowadays, it is approximately only 2 % or 40% if we take into account all the speakers of Irish (even those who state having just a partial knowledge of the Irish language) [8]. In the case of other Celtic languages revitalization in UK, it is described as having more or less just a kind of a local-patriotic intellectual character which might decline in the future [5].

Today´s Support of the Irish Language in the Republic of Ireland

Nowadays there are many organizations which support national and cultural identity of the Irish through the medium of Irish language cultivation and preservation. The two pivotal ones are Údarás na Gaeltachta and Foras na Gaelige. The first one, Údarás na Gaeltachta was established in 1980 and it is responsible for the promotion, cultivation and preservation of the Irish language in the specific Gaeltacht area with the final aim to keep the language viable for future generations. Another partial aims are connected with Irish language education. The members of the organization have developed many initiatives to support Irish language in pre-schools as well as in public through the medium of language courses and language services [19].

As far as the second organization is concerned, Foras na Gaelige is in charge of promotion of Irish throughout the whole of Ireland in both areas, namely the North and the South. It was founded in 1999. The aims of the Foras na Gaelige are similar to the previous organization and they range from promotion of the Irish language, support of Irish medium education to supportive projects and research activities in the given area [14].

Except for two main organizations, Irish language is also supported through broadcasting, namely it is the Irish language TV channel TG4, the radio called RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta and number of Irish language newspapers (Gaelscéal, Foinse, Saol, Nuacht24). Furthermore, a few sections in national (the Irish Times, the Irish News) and local newspapers are published in Irish language too [8].

As for education, it was mentioned previously that Irish language is obligatory subject at schools. Besides there are also schools in which education is carried out through the medium of the Irish language. Moreover, many universities offer unique study programs to students like the Irish language or Irish Cultural Studies and they also organized various courses for those who are interested in learning and improving the language (Galway National University of Ireland, Trinity College in Dublin).

Least but not least, there is a number of festivals held in Ireland which promote Irish language and culture such as Irish Language Week festival [18] or IMRAM (Irish Language Literature Festival) [15] and many others.

Official Documents Referring to the Status of the Irish Language

As it is generally known, the Irish language has been declared as one of the official languages of the European Union which happened precisely in 2007 [8]. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs website, since granting the Irish language the same status as is being enjoyed by other Member States´ languages, new arrangements must have been also accepted following the changed status of the Irish language which had been a treaty language before (since Ireland joined the EEC in 1973, the same year as UK did). These mentioned new arrangements for Irish are:

- „Knowledge of the Irish language is taken into account for the purposes of recruitment to the EU institutions
- EU regulations adopted jointly by the Council and the European Parliament will be translated into Irish
- Interpretation from Irish is also provided to meet needs at Ministerial meetings and at the European Parliament
- The nameplates in front of Irish Ministers and delegations now say "Éire Ireland" to reflect the new status of Irish in the EU also" [13].

In practice, the last arrangement has been adapted well in the Irish context which means that nameplates in the Republic of Ireland as well as road and traffic signs are translated into Irish while Irish language is having preference as the first official and national language which is why the Irish version is written as the first one. A few examples include the Irish version of Baile Átha Cliath for Dublin, Tulach Mhór for Tullamore or Corcaigh for Cork. Except for Irish versions of cities, towns or villages, other general signs situated in the vicinity of road system are also reflecting this recently attained status of Irish (Golf Gumann – Golf Club, Aerfort – airport, Iarnród Éireann – Irish Rail).

According to Department of Foreign Affairs website the fact that Irish language gained such an important status has brought not only joys but also sorrows since 2007 concerning realization of translation and interpretation services to and from the Irish language [13]. Mostly the translations and interpretations are focused on key documents published by EU´s institutions while citizens have got right to address Irish and European institutions in Irish language and be responded accordingly through the medium of Irish language.

But there is still a long way to go when we take into account the problems with legal vocabulary, thus legal translation is very demanding and deserves time spent while searching for the best equivalent. However, help is not rare as there are many higher institutions like National University of Ireland (Galway) and Dublin City University which have undertaken the challenges of translation dilemma. One the one hand, the third-level courses and study programs aimed at Irish language or Irish cultural studies are good signs for future graduates and even this helps those enhancing adequate level of Irish to find excellent work opportunity in Irish and European workspace.

Furthermore, what is quite positive about acquiring official status of Irish language is the fact that European citizens have become acquainted with Irish language itself and with the importance of Irish language in cultural and national identity formation of the Irish. Moreover, there are a lot of materials published in Irish language (Europa website, through the medium of Irish Translation Unit) and many Irish cultural events are organized at the level of European institutions. Courses specialized at interpretation and translation services have been opened in the Republic of Ireland although, still there are not enough of professionally trained interpreters and translators who would be ready to carry out interpretation and translation services. Therefore, a special term derogation is used to put into light real interpretation and translations works at European level. This derogation was lifted in 2007, renewed in 2010 and will be discussed later in 2015 [17].

In short, the Irish language acquired a new status that inhabitants of the Republic of Ireland have been striving for long decades. On one hand, it brings many positives if we take into consideration increase of national awareness and strengthening of national and cultural identity of the nation, while on the other hand, it also carries certain challenges that not only the state and politicians have to cope with.

As being indicated in the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030, made by the Government of Ireland, the key focus of the strategy is to strengthen the position of the language within education system, while the transmission of Irish as a living language within family and between generations is critically important. The strategy is hugely in favour of creating a supportive framework and the opportunities in which Irish can be used on in a natural way within households and communities which is stressed to be important for all the areas, with Gaeltacht area (the area situated in the western part of the country in which predominant language spoken is Irish) taken as an exquisite example of special importance [20].

Thus, the strategy is aimed at reaching the status of bilingualism referring to knowledge of both languages, namely Irish and English, so the inhabitants are fluent in both of them. These aims create challenge not only for government but also for the people as it is up to them how they cope with the situation in the future.

Moreover, the Strategy is aimed not only at students and teachers (through developing their language fluency and accuracy) but also at family and the support of family in Irish language learning. The family, as it is well-known, is the cornerstone of society, so it plays a huge role in language acquisition of the child. Therefore, one of the areas which the Strategy tries to hit by instant support and help in leading children to Irish language speaking, is the area of family [20].

Conclusion

Taking a step back, when facing discrepancies about the number of Irish language users, one must have a look at historical consequences that had a huge effect on the decrease of Irish speaking people, starting with potato famine of 1840s followed by vast emigration of the Irish people abroad. According to the *Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning* Ireland is still facing the emigration problem. On one hand, diaspora reduced the number of those Irish speaking migrants, returning home with non-Irish speaking wives but, on the other hand, diaspora also contains many Irish speakers who wish to re-possess the language of their forbearers. Therefore, there are departments of Irish studies at many universities abroad and Irish language education is supported in all-Ireland context [16].

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