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Noel O Murchadha, Bettina Migge

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A Celtic view on minority language dynamics: support, transmission, education and target language varieties

Noel P. Ó Murchadha (Trinity College Dublin, University of Dublin)

Bettina Migge (University College Dublin)

Introduction

When we talk of the modern Celtic languages today we refer to the Insular¹ Celtic varieties that have maintained (or indeed regained) a degree of their linguistic vitality and that are practised, to varying extents and in various forms, by users of the Breton, Cornish, Irish, Manx, Scottish Gaelic and Welsh languages. Further to their common linguistic derivation, the Celtic languages share a number of additional characteristics that lend themselves well to a common analytical framework (features that they indeed share with many other 'small' languages). Each of the languages has, for a long time, been functioning in a bilingual, if not multilingual, environment (e.g. Timm, 2013, 2010, on Breton; Ferdinand, 2013, George & Broderick, 2009, on Cornish; Doyle, 2015, Mac Giolla Chríost, 2005, on Irish; George & Broderick, 2009, on Manx; Ó Baoill, 2010, MacLeod, 2010 on Scottish Gaelic; Davies, 2014, on Welsh). Contact with major global languages has had a decisive and formative effect on the trajectories of the Celtic languages (c.f. chapters in Tristram, 2007). The reality of interaction with the French and English languages since the sixteenth century and especially in more recent centuries, has meant that the Celtic languages have been subject to historical processes of minoritisation and language shift (Fife, 2009; Price, 1992). Consequently, in global terms, each of the languages is reliant on a relatively small pool of speakers for their survival. Perhaps unsurprisingly for those familiar with the dynamics of minority languages, then, language maintenance, revitalisation and revival projects have been among of the hallmarks of the Celtic-language experience for some time. This speaks to a familiar appetite among at least some users, as well as non-users, to go against the grain of language loss and to try to ensure that the Celtic languages are used into the future despite an extremely challenging climate.

This special issue of *Language, Culture and Curriculum* emerged from the first Celtic Sociolinguistics Symposium held at University College Dublin in June 2015. The Symposium, in turn, focused on themes that permeate research on the sociolinguistics of the Celtic languages, including intergenerational transmission; language and identity; language in education; language in the media, and attitudes to linguistic variation. The investigation of sociolinguistic aspects of the Celtic languages provides a useful pan-Celtic perspective on issues in other languages that are endangered and have benefited from revitalisation activities. It thus lends itself to the analysis of the relationship between language and society in related, yet diverse, spaces and cultures. Of course, any sociolinguistic account of the Celtic languages, in one way or another, has to deal with issues of language endangerment and language revival. Therefore, in addition to advancing our understanding of the Celtic languages, the study of their current status offers a context-specific window into the dynamics of minoritised languages and language varieties in modern Western society. The study of the Celtic languages and their speakers can, in this way, illuminate the social, cultural and political factors that shape processes of language loss and preservation. It thus has the potential to enhance our understanding of how social actors recruit, or, perhaps more pertinently in some cases, don't recruit, minority languages in negotiating increasingly fluid social, cultural and political environments. In addition, it adds to our understanding of both language and society in a globalised world. Following a brief outline of speaker demographics in the next section, the

remainder of this introductory article will focus on some of the key issues currently faced by the Celtic languages and will illustrate how this special issue makes a contribution to scholarship in those areas.

Speaker demographics

The worldwide trend of diminishing linguistic diversity is well documented (e.g. Crystal, 2000; Dorian, 2014; Moseley, 2012; Nettle & Romaine, 2000) and the Celtic languages are, or have historically been, subject to the global flows that induce and precipitate language shift. Intergenerational transmission in the home is routinely cited as one of the mainstays of successful initiatives to sustain the vigour of threatened languages or to reverse processes of language shift (Fishman, 1991). The low level, or in some cases the complete collapse, of transfer of the Celtic languages in the home has significantly contributed to shaping the current status of the languages, however (e.g. Jones, 1998; Ó Giollagáin & Charlton, 2015; McLeod, 2014). Likewise, the interaction between the home domain and other linguistically-strategic domains has impacted language vitality in the Celtic varieties. Consequently, reported total numbers of speakers of the Celtic languages today and the geographical distribution of those speakers sketch a very different picture to times when the languages were in their pomp. Data on user numbers, despite their limitations and the variation in the levels of detail available in the different language contexts, provide a useful view of the extent of the languages in the different polities where they are primarily used. The data on the Gaelic varieties (Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Manx), tell us that in Ireland over 77,000 speakers report speaking Irish on a daily basis outside the education system in the Republic of Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2012), while in Northern Ireland just under 98,000 people claim an ability to speak Irish (Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency, 2012). The figures for Scottish Gaelic reveal that in excess of 57,000 people in Scotland claim an ability to speak the language (National Records of Scotland, 2015) with others claiming 'Gaelic languages', as their 'mother tongue' in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2012). In terms of Manx, more than 1,600 claim an ability to speak the language (Economic Affairs Division, Isle of Man Government Treasury, 2012) while in the case of Welsh almost 361,000 people in Wales report using the language on a daily basis (Welsh Government & Welsh Language Commissioner, 2015) with further speakers present in Patagonia, Argentina (Jones, 2012). Although the last native speaker of Cornish is both widely and contentiously reported to have died in the late 18th century, some 500 individuals returned as Cornish speakers in the 2011 UK Census (Office for National Statistics, 2013), despite there being no designated space on the form to do so (Tresidder, 2015: 217). In Brittany, at the same time, approximately 200,000 speakers of Breton are estimated (Ofis Publik ar Brezhoneg, 2013).

Owing to the loss of domains of usage, as witnessed in the relatively weak patterns of intergenerational transmission in the home and in patterns of peer and community language usage, the Celtic languages are today much more heavily reliant on alternative modes of language transmission and on the interaction between the home and other domains in order to sustain the individual languages. This is the reality faced in supporting the Celtic varieties both in those areas where they endure as community varieties (with a range of degrees of robustness) and in facilitating the expansion of the pool of users beyond these areas. The academic literature on minority language communities commonly reveal that maintenance efforts face challenges in terms of fostering support for small languages, in relation to language transmission in the home, in defining the role of education in maintenance, revitalisation and revival, and in establishing the target language variety/varieties. The Celtic languages are no exception. These issues will each be discussed in turn

below with a view to mapping how scholarship on the sociolinguistics of the Celtic languages might progress in the future.

Fostering support

The loss of status and prestige has historically had a decisive impact on the fate of the Celtic languages (Price, 1992), as has been the case in language minoritisation worldwide (Fishman, 1991). The advance of English and French and their dominance in prestige domains was accompanied by an inverse development in the Celtic varieties. The Celtic languages gradually came to be deemed superfluous, perhaps even detrimental, to economic progress and social mobility in their respective polities. In modern times, where users of the Celtic languages are at least bilingual, the way the languages are perceived remains important. Positive perceptions of the communicative and the symbolic functions of the languages are fundamental to their continued use in the future. Where individuals raised in Celtic language-speaking homes/communities are convinced of the continued utility of the languages in their own lives, it follows that they are more likely to remain active users of the languages. Likewise for new speakers who have acquired high degrees of proficiency in the languages. For learners or potential learners, the perceived integrative and instrumental value of the Celtic varieties will play an important role in motivating them to commit themselves to attaining a level of ability that will allow them to function in the languages. Even among non-users, the perception of the Celtic languages is important so that resources dedicated to them can be justified with reference to existing levels of public support for their continued use. Support for maintaining the Celtic languages is evident in attitudinal research (e.g. Darmody & Daly, 2015; Mac Gréil & Rhatigan, 2009), in the continued use of the languages by some members of traditional communities, in the commitment of new speakers to the languages and in the appetite of some non-users to learn the languages. However, it is unclear to what extent the current levels of support will secure their futures. How the languages are perceived remains important in deciding their future, but it remains unclear what the conditions are under which support for the Celtic languages translates to actual increases in usage or language transmission. This is a question that would benefit from more sustained sociolinguistic attention. In outlining the current state of play, John Edwards, in his article in this Special Issue, assesses some of the primary challenges faced by the Celtic languages and thus contributes to this debate.

In a broad-ranging article, Edwards examines the current status and future trajectories of the Celtic languages. Focussing especially, though not exclusively, on the Irish and Scottish Gaelic contexts, he explores the factors that continue to restrict the maintenance and expansion of the Celtic languages. Based mainly on a critical assessment of recent media reports on Celtic languages, Edwards shows that the continued use and, particularly, the expansion of the Celtic languages is hampered by negative attitudes in wider society and by the fact that the Celtic languages are still underrepresented in the public sphere. Celtic languages, for instance, are rarely able to occupy a discursive space on their own, but typically co-exist with the dominant language in the setting in order to cater to the needs of the majority population who normally have, at best, a passive knowledge of these languages. Although, he argues, there continues to be sufficient enthusiasm among the wider population and policy makers to maintain some measures to promote these languages, provisions such as Celtic language-medium education are generally only partially effective. He contends that there is generally either a lack of 'man power', such as the absence of qualified teachers to properly carry out these measures or there is a lack of funding. Overall the situation, he suggests, makes for a rather bleak future.

Language transmission

Supporters of the Celtic languages face challenges in assuring the public of the merits of communicating in these languages and of making available financial and human resources to support their survival (e.g. Darmody & Daly, 2015; Edwards, this issue; Mac Gréil & Rhatigan, 2009). A significant cohort, however, are already committed to maintaining, revitalising or reviving Breton, Cornish, Scottish Gaelic, Irish, Manx and Welsh. Many are aware of the benefits of a form of bilingualism that incorporates a Celtic language, are committed to using the language, and/or desire and plan for the next generation to have an ability to communicate in a Celtic language. The choice of language management strategies to achieve transmission to the next generation, however, does not always align with documented successful models (e.g. Ó hIfearnáin, 2006; O'Toole & Hickey, 2016; Smith-Christmas, this issue). Examples are thus described in the literature of situations where even caregivers who are highly competent in one of the Celtic languages and who wish for their children to be skilled bilinguals don't maximise exposure to the minority language in the home (Ó hIfearnáin, 2006; Smith Christmas, this issue). Furthermore, the way these minoritised varieties are used, not used, or discursively framed in the home can engender links between the languages and other domains, such as education or religion, in a way that confines them to those domains and renders their use in the broader context highly marked (Smith-Christmas, 2014; this issue). A mismatch between language management strategies and desired outcomes is evident and is largely attributable to insufficient awareness of successful models of language transmission or to the difficulties in implementing such models despite awareness of them. Although sociolinguists working on the Celtic languages have, with large degrees of success, identified the factors influencing language abandonment, the message regarding strategies for successful transmission in the home has not fully filtered down to the grassroots level. Celtic sociolinguists' proclivity for pointing to the (albeit important) tell tales of language decline, to the neglect of comprehensive descriptions of successful language transmission strategies in the home, is noteworthy here. While the abundant literature that describes the conditions of shift in the Celtic languages is illuminating, only a very sparse literature exists recounting the, admittedly more scarce, examples of successful Celtic language transmission in the home. The academic endeavour to comprehensively outline language shift, maintenance, revitalisation and revival, as well as the general public concerned with the fate of the Celtic varieties, would benefit from scholars becoming more *engagé* in cases of successful transmission. Such a development would advance our understanding of the conditions of small languages and, in addition, provide an exemplar for the converted. The article in this Special Issue by Cassie Smith-Christmas falls within this area.

The discursive framing of the Celtic languages among their speakers and its impact on language maintenance is the topic of the article by Smith-Christmas. The article critically investigates a long-standing issue that exists in minority language maintenance, namely how minority language immersion programmes and the broader community interact and whether or not the relationship between the two is conducive to the continued vitality of the minority language. Based on an analysis of data from long-term participant observation and recordings of language practices in an extended Scottish Gaelic-speaking family on the Isle of Skye, Smith-Christmas shows that the lack of use of Scottish Gaelic outside of the educational context is not solely attributable to a lack of competence in the language. Rather, it is contended that patterns of language usage are moulded by the language practices of caregivers and the strategies that they employ in order to encourage the use of Gaelic in the youngest generation. The micro-interactional analysis shows that despite the fact that the caregivers of the child in the study, Maggie, generally have highly positive views of Gaelic, are themselves active users of the language, and are in favour of passing it on, Gaelic is not always the medium of interaction between adults in front of the child and child-directed uses of

Gaelic are generally framed as a pedagogical exercise. As a result, the author suggests that Maggie has internalised the view that Gaelic is only available for irregular, school-based interaction. In light of this, it seems that despite the desire to achieve language transmission in the home, the fate of the Celtic varieties may be largely dependent on the education system, a point that will be elaborated now.

The role of education

The presence of minoritised languages in education, whether subject only, bilingual programmes, or a full immersion experience, is mostly viewed in a positive light by those interested in their preservation, although it is by no means the panacea that some enthusiasts hope for (e.g. chapters in Hornberger 2008). Much of what emerges from sociolinguistic research on the effectiveness of language education in the Celtic varieties highlights the many strengths of these initiatives and, especially, the challenges they face. The significant demand that exists for education in the Celtic languages (Darmody & Daly, 2015; O'Hanlon & Patterson, this issue; Redknap, 2006) suggests that educational models that include them either as a subject or as a medium of instruction are recognised as effective for linguistic development and/or for broader educational success. Education in the Celtic varieties undoubtedly has the potential as well as a documented record of developing learners' language proficiency (McCloskey, 2001; Nance, 2015; Ó Duibhir, 2009), of moulding positive ideologies around the languages (McCloskey, 2001; Walsh & O'Rourke, 2014) and of functioning as a trigger that prompts lifelong participation in the ethnoculture of habitual users of the languages (Walsh & O'Rourke 2014). However, the modern history of the institutionalisation of the Celtic languages in the form of educational provision demonstrates that the rollout of language in education programmes, even full immersion models, does not guarantee a vibrant language community (Dunmore, 2014). If it were the case that the inclusion of the Celtic languages in education resulted in widespread use of the languages beyond that domain, for instance, languages like Welsh and Irish (which have a relatively strong presence in education) would be far more widely practiced outside education than is presently the case.

The myriad factors influencing the choice or potential choice to study a Celtic language or to study through the medium of a Celtic language tend to vary. They include, for example, attitudinal factors, a desire to ensure that children develop linguistic proficiency in a Celtic variety, the alignment with a particular culture or identity, and in some extreme cases, an elitist desire to avoid alternatives due to the socio-economic profiles of students (Baker, 2000; Kavanagh, 2013; Mas-Moury Mack, 2013; O'Hanlon, 2015). People also foreground instrumental reasons such as the pursuit of the academic success that is associated with education in a language that is not the home language and the educational benefits that are linked to bilingualism (Baker, 2000; Kavanagh, 2013; Mas-Moury Mack, 2013; O'Hanlon, 2015). But, there are also other, more mundane, reasons that play a role such as a school's proximity to the home or to work. Just as the factors that influence the decision to seek education in a Celtic language vary, so does the support for the Celtic language outside of school. Support in the form of opportunities for language use and for the development of literacy in the Celtic languages, for example, is available for some students through the community and in the home, yet is not accessible to others. It is hardly a shock, then, that student outcomes vary with regards to linguistic proficiency and language ideologies, and that education does not lead to more widespread use of the languages outside that domain. Students' motivation to engage with the languages clearly plays an important role. Owing to the diverse sociolinguistic profiles and motivations of students developing proficiency in the Celtic languages through subject only or through Celtic language-medium education (e.g. Baker, 2000; Hickey, 2001; Mac Donnacha, Ní Chualáin, Ní Shéaghdha & Ní Mhainín, 2005; Thomas & Williams 2013), it is apposite to investigate

the extent to which the different forms of Celtic language education align with the linguistic needs and aims of those it serves. That education makes some form of contribution to the vitality of the Celtic languages is fairly clear (McCloskey, 2001). What is less clear, however, is the exact nature of that contribution in terms of promoting positive dispositions and actual language usage outside education. A more complete picture of the role of the Celtic languages in education would emerge were the existing research augmented by studies that explore education within the broader context of the home-school-community nexus (c.f. Walsh, Ó Murchadha, Carty, de Bres, Amorrortu Gomez, Laugharne & Nance, 2015). Thereby, the mechanics of how exactly education, in its interaction with other factors and influences, contributes to the vibrancy of the languages might be more fully explained. Investigations are lacking of the specific pedagogical approaches that best facilitate users and learners of all proficiency levels to participate in the life of a Celtic language as appropriate to their abilities. Furthermore, additional descriptions of the sociolinguistic and pedagogical conditions that are conducive to achieving proficiency and that enable participation in the ethnoculture of habitual language users would also be welcome (e.g. Ní Chlochasaigh, 2014; chapters in Smith-Christmas, Ó Murchadha, Hornsby & Moriarty, forthcoming).

As, education is a key focus of language policy and language planning in the Celtic languages, the factors influencing the likelihood of choice of Celtic language-medium education merits attention. Thus the article by O'Hanlon and Patterson in this special issue focuses on the likelihood of choice of Gaelic-medium education in Scotland. The article draws on data from the 2012 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, which includes 40 questions on Gaelic and comprises interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,229 participants over 18 years of age. Set within Baker's (2000) model of bilingual education as planning, as pedagogy and as politics, the authors use inferential quantitative methods to investigate the impact of five factors that have been found to play a role in language education in Scotland. They include: demographic characteristics, exposure to Gaelic, cultural and national identities, views on the future of Gaelic and views on Gaelic in education. The authors find that while all factors contribute to the choice of Gaelic-medium education, views about the Gaelic language had the greatest impact, followed by demographic characteristics and cultural and national identity-based issues. This confirms the results from other studies on Gaelic and other Celtic languages which showed that ideological considerations rather than matters of language competence play a crucial role in the likelihood of choice of Celtic language-medium education.

Máiréad Moriarty's article in this Special Issue contributes further to the scholarship on the Celtic languages in education. Moriarty examines the educational potential of so-called 'translanguaging' pedagogy in the minority-language classroom. In a departure from approaches to bilingualism and second-language teaching that promote the separation of codes and the sole use of the target language, Moriarty echoes previous calls (Garcia & Wei, 2013; Gorter, 2015) for an approach to language teaching that promotes the use of learners' previously-known languages to facilitate the learning of 'new' languages. Focussing on Irish, the article advances research in translanguaging by empirically assessing the potential of this approach to minority language teaching. While the teaching of Irish has been a cornerstone of the Irish state's language maintenance policy since its foundation, it is highlighted that this approach has not, as initially hoped, resulted in high degrees of language use outside education. It is hypothesised that this is in part due to the prescribed approach to the teaching of Irish that promotes the sole use of the target language. The article uses data from a twelve-week case study of integrating rap in the Irish language primary school curriculum to explore the efficacy of rap as an innovative, translanguaging resource for the teaching of Irish. The author suggests that educational resources that allow children to digress from strict normative language use and encourage the use of all social and linguistic resources for meaning making foster a more positive ideological position for Irish in the classroom and in the students' social environment.

The integration of transglossic practices, it is argued, also helps to scaffold learning for different levels of competence. A further issue that consistently arises in research on sociolinguistic aspects of education in small languages concerns contention around competing linguistic norms (Ó Murchadha 2016; Ó Murchadha, Smith-Christmas, Moriarty & Hornsby, forthcoming). This issue is closely related to education, but will be explored in detail in relation to the Celtic languages in the following section.

What is the target variety?

The hierarchical classification of speakers and of ways of speaking is a common social phenomenon across languages and has concerned modern sociolinguistics since its inception (Garrett 2010). Varieties are imbued with social values and certain varieties and users are indexed as legitimate, authoritative, authentic, and correct. Others do not enjoy this status. These ideological classifications are found in small languages also (Ó Murchadha, Smith-Christmas, Moriarty & Hornsby, forthcoming) and are attested in the Celtic varieties (Hornsby, 2010; Jones, 1998; MacCaluim, 2007; Nance, McLeod, O'Rourke & Dunmore, 2016; Ó Murchadha, 2013, 2016; Ó Murchadha & Ó hIfearnáin, forthcoming; Robert, 2009; Sayers, 2012). Thus, debates on target varieties for Celtic language users have been characterised by contention. The roots of contention lie in ideological assumptions about the value of traditional and post-traditional language varieties and practices and in attitudes to language users who practice those traditional and post-traditional varieties. The authority, authenticity and ownership of the languages and the ways they are practiced become points of tension. This emanates from language management goals that aim to promote the use of the Celtic languages into the future. Echoing Romaine's (2006) and Bentahila and Davies' (1993) ideas, Hornsby (this issue) and Ó hIfearnáin (2015) have described how language management efforts in the Celtic languages have tended to focus on their social, cultural and linguistic *restoration* to pre-shift conditions. At the same time, the sociolinguistic *transformation* of the languages has been viewed with suspicion. Innovative linguistic features, forms and practices that have developed during shift and revival in the Celtic languages have tended to be denigrated. The post-traditional linguistic styles and practices of younger speakers and of revival or so-called 'new speakers' are strongly contested (Ó Murchadha, Smith-Christmas, Moriarty & Hornsby, forthcoming). Practices are denigrated that deviate from traditional forms in their phonology, grammar and syntax, in using hybrid forms that incorporate French or English, and that make more limited use of the Celtic languages in what some view as tokenistic ways. To the extent that the Celtic languages will be used into the future, however, it is likely that they will be used in an increasingly innovative fashion. In addition to documenting those practices and ideologies around them, it would be informative to illustrate the extent to which different linguistic models are successfully implemented and allow users of all levels of proficiency to participate in the lives of the Celtic languages and contribute to their vitality. Michael Hornsby's article in this special issue is a contribution to this area.

Hornsby investigates the ideological tensions that result from language shift, on the one hand, and the development of what has come to be called 'new speaker' communities for lesser-used languages from the perspective of the concept of post-vernacularity. Focusing on (language) autobiographies and other narratives in the context of Breton, Hornsby explores the language ideologies of the traditional native-speaker community and those of the new speakers. While both sets of speakers are very much invested in the maintenance of Breton, the two sets of speakers do not constitute a 'community', as is frequently the case, especially in the context of Celtic languages. The traditional native-speaker community values Breton as a family and community language and is suspicious of the motives of the new speakers and disapproves of their language practices – both how

and when they use the language – which often diverge in several ways from their own. New speakers, in contrast, are often language activists whose aim is to spread the use of the language and to increase its visibility for a variety of reasons. The activist stance is often disapproved of by the traditional speakers who actively attempt to curb these new usages among the new speakers through language policing and generally do not actively engage with new speakers.

Conclusion

Although this special issue is by no means an exhaustive account of all of the issues faced by all of the Celtic languages, it is hoped that it will advance research on sociolinguistic aspects of the Celtic languages and that it will contribute more broadly to research on the sociolinguistics of small languages and varieties. Starting from the ideological perspective that linguistic diversity is worth sustaining, we take it that a core function of the sociolinguistic enterprise in minority languages, like the Celtic languages, is to explicate the conditions and strategies that facilitate and restrict the continued use of these languages. Specifically, the articles that comprise this special issue raise important questions that are germane to issues concerning: levels of support for minoritised languages that move beyond the abstract and the symbolic; the diversification of minority language teaching methodologies to include an approach that enables all learners to engage with ‘small’ languages in an educational context and to contribute to the vitality of the language in a way that aligns with their own current competence; the coherence between native, traditional speakers and non-native, new speakers populations; the local language management strategies that aim to transmit the language to younger generations, but that don’t necessarily conform to documented successful approaches; and the social and ideological factors that influence parents’ stance on minority language-medium education. Together, the articles address many of the issues that are fundamental to sustaining linguistic diversity and to the vitality of the Celtic languages.

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¹ Although the designation 'Insular' is by now a bit of a misnomer when it comes to the Breton language, the term is used alongside the term 'Continental' in linguistic categorisations of the historical forms of the Celtic languages. Although Breton has been resident on the continent for around 1,500 years, its geographical and linguistic origins are thought to lie in the insular varieties (Fife 2009).