

The Struggle For Irish From The Bottom Up

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The Struggle for Irish: “From the Bottom Up”

Interview with Pàdraig Ó Siadhail, D’Arcy McGhee Chair of Irish Studies, Saint Mary’s University

Ireland is one of the countries in which the British, who still occupy Northern Ireland, strove to repress the national language. The Irish government recently cut its funding of the all-Ireland Irish language body, *Foras na Gaeilge*, by 11 per cent, almost £2 million. This also means that Britain can cut back its funding for the development of the Irish language which it was obligated to provide in the Good Friday Agreement. The Agreement stated that it would “take resolute action to promote the Irish language.”

Overall, it is unlikely that the number of active Irish speakers on the island (population 5.5 million) of Ireland exceeds 100,000. A total of 3,229 children now go to Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland, an increase from five pupils in 1971. The North now has a tenth of all the pupils in Irish-medium education today. Until two years ago, almost half of the Irish-medium schools in the North were not funded by the state.

TML is posting below in interview by *Mac-talla* with Pàdraig Ó Siadhail, associate professor and D’Arcy McGhee Chair of Irish Studies at Saint Mary’s University, on his views on the state of Irish today.

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Mac-talla: An Ghaeilge, the Irish language, is one of the official national languages of the people of Ireland. Yet at the same time it is a “minority” language -- considered by UNESCO as an endangered language.

Pàdraig Ó Siadhail: What you have to keep in mind about Ireland is that you are talking about two different jurisdictions. There are the 26 counties, known as the Republic of Ireland. Then you have the six counties in the part known officially as Northern Ireland, as in “The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland,” where power is vested in Westminster.

If we look at the Republic of Ireland, Irish is recognized in the *Irish Constitution of 1937*, as the first official language, the national language of Ireland. The second part of Article VIII of the Constitution recognizes English as a second official language. The minority language, Irish, is in fact the first official language. In Ireland, at present, both North and South, there are not monoglot Irish speakers. Everybody in Ireland, with the possible exception of very recent immigrants, speaks English. But you also have a percentage of the population -- the exact percentage is open to dispute -- that also speak Irish. When you talk about an Irish speaker in Ireland, you have to distinguish between three groups.

MT: ...which are?

PÓS: The first is in the *Gaeltacht*, mostly on the west coast of Ireland, where there are scattered communities who speak Irish as their first language. The second group are *non-Gaeltacht* native Irish speakers, for example, family where Irish is the first language. These can be found anywhere, in Dublin, in small villages, or in Belfast. The third group are the secondary bilinguals who learned the language through the school system. You have different groups, different constituencies within *pobal na Gaeilge*, Irish speakers. That can sometimes cause confusion when people discuss Irish speakers. It is quite

diverse in terms of social-economic class. It includes small farmers, to people who are prosperous upper middle class, to working class... with different political allegiances. In the political situation in the North, there has been this caricature of the Irish speaker as a fellow-traveller of the IRA. But for every example of that, there might be 10 other Irish speakers who do not have strong views about the IRA. And in the South there would be a large group of Irish speakers who would be diametrically opposed to the IRA and would support the present government coalition of Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats, and are far removed ideologically from Sinn Féin. It is worth noting as regards the status of Irish that while it has constitutional status in the Republic, Ireland still doesn't have a language law! It's been promised to us now for the last few years. There are versions of it floating around, but there is still no act of law that will set down the rights of Irish speakers, *i.e.*, how they are entitled to be treated in their own sovereign state.

MT: *Fianna Fáil promised this?*

PÓS: We've been waiting for a long time. It's one of the ironies of the Irish situation. Despite the historical and cultural importance that both the Constitution and the politicians give to the language, in reality Irish speakers have had to fight every inch of the way. When one sees, for example, the really hopeful signs for Irish in the development of an *Ghaelscolaíocht*, Irish-medium schooling, this has truly come "from the bottom up." It is democracy in action, with communities saying, "well, this is something worth doing," while meeting stiff resistance from the major players in the education system in Ireland, the Departments of Education, North and South, the Teachers' Unions and the Roman Catholic Church. This Irish medium schooling movement has had to organize in the face of official indifference and even hostility.

MT: *What are some of the features of this movement?*

PÓS: First, citizens, both parents and children, have a right to education in the language of their choice ... and a recognition that the lip service towards Irish within the regular school system was not going to

produce Irish speakers.

MT: *What you mean by "lip service"?*

PÓS: Nominally, Irish was central to the education system. The state was taking on the responsibility of ensuring that Irish survived as a language. However, Irish soon became no more than another subject on the curriculum. There was a sense that it was nothing more or nothing less than say, French, or studying geography. One of the things -- obvious enough -- is that with Irish-medium education, Irish is now the medium of education. It removes the sense that Irish is just another subject. Another change is that, once you get the children, you have the parents. In many instances, the parents were sympathetic with having their children schooled in Irish but they had no great knowledge of the language themselves. They would now have to get involved in the system, setting up activities for the children -- but it was the children who got the parents involved. This has been a much more positive way, from the bottom, much more democratic, from the communities -- rather than being imposed from above.

MT: *One of the attacks launched by the anglicising forces against Gaelic is that it is an inferior ancient language, incapable of providing a modern cognitive medium to express advanced scientific thought. Is there a similar derogation against Irish?*

PÓS: Yes, of course. You come up against an awful amount of ignorance. People who frequently have problems learning Irish language transfer their "hang-up" about this onto the language itself. Time and time again, one comes across this pathetic argument that to have a child learning two languages -- and of course Irish as the second language -- is somehow going to retard the child. This has been disproved by dozens of studies. In fact, having more than one language is a boon for people. Then there's the argument that by raising a child with a language other than English they will become some kind of misfit, that they won't be able to find a role for themselves as useful citizens. It's absolute silliness. What it reflects -- certainly this would be the Irish experience -- is that through the process of colonisation, people in



Ireland lost confidence in their native culture, and in themselves, and compensated for that by adopting the idea that English was the language of progress. If we are talking about the ability of a language like Irish to express advanced scientific thoughts, medical tracts were being translated from Greek into Irish in the Middle Ages. This isn't something that's happening because the Department of Education has compiled some terminology that can be used in 2003; this was happening more than a thousand years ago. Yes, obviously as technology changes one must develop the appropriate terminology and vocabulary to express and discuss it. French had to do it. English had to do it. We have seen the new editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* where a committee sits down to decide what words are acceptable. Well, now there are people doing that for Irish. That is part and parcel of the development of every language, whether it is a global language such as English or a language such as Irish. No language is automatically inferior.

MT: This issue really is not the "integrity" of the language, but the colonisation and neo-colonisation process and the affirmation, continuing from the past into today of the right to be of the Irish language -- as part of the Irish persona.

PÓS: How the Irish see themselves brings us back to the language question. There have been dramatic changes in Ireland recently. Apart from economic prosperity, there is a strong sense of reintegration into the European mainstream rather than being mere sidekicks of Britain. In turn, these changes, whereby Irish people now encounter languages other than English, have had a positive impact on how Irish people see Irish. The challenge -- some would argue, the downside -- within this maelstrom of change in Ireland has been the struggle to withstand the rise of Americanization. American cultural hegemony presents one of the major challenges to having another window on the world. Any language that offers the chance of another perspective in an increasingly homogenised world is something that has to be valued. For me, whether this is reflected

in the syntax of Irish as compared to the syntax of English, whether it has to do with cultural elements of language, anything that allows you to see the world in a way that's different from the way we're told we ought to see it by those who seek to control information -- anything that allows you to escape from that, to view issues from a different angle -- has to be valued. That for me as an Irish person remains one of the most compelling reasons to have another language.

MT: ...for affirming our own independence from the cosmopolitan, homogenous universe?

PÓS: It's a battle, but one has to fight it. The world towards which we are moving is one where the Rupert Murdochs and CNNs of this world are attempting to dictate not just what we see but how we think -- that's where the defence of other languages such as Irish and Scottish Gaelic is vital.