

# How a Member State can influence EU Language Policy? – The Case of the Irish Language

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*All views expressed in this paper are personal to the author.*

## Introduction

As many of you may not have heard the Irish language before, I would like to begin in Irish:

*Is mór an chúis áthais dom a bheith ar ais i mBratislava. Gabhaim buíochas as an gcuireadh is tréasláim don Choiste Eagrúcháin as a dtionscnamh ag ullmhú na comhdhála. Tá súil agam go mbeidh comhdháil úsáideach thaitneamhach againn, a rachaidh chun tairbhe na hEorpa, agus do chomh-chearta teanga san Eoraip.*

*(I am delighted to be back in Bratislava. I wish to thank the organisers for their invitation, and congratulate them on their initiative in organising this conference. I hope this conference will be both useful and enjoyable, and will contribute towards European integration and towards linguistic justice in Europe.)*

On 13 June 2005 the EU<sup>1</sup> Council of Ministers decided, unanimously as is required for such decisions, that the Irish language should join the EU's list of official working languages. The decision takes effect on 1 January 2007, when Romanian and Bulgarian will also be added, bring the total to 23. This was the first time that the EU decided to change its official working languages regime, apart from adding the official languages of new member states at each enlargement. What were the circumstances which led to this unique decision, and why was it so important for Ireland? To understand this, we need to examine why the Irish people is so attached to a language that most of them do not speak regularly. Why did Ireland not full EU status for its national language when it joined the EU on 1 January 1973?

Why is the very name of this language a matter of controversy: many of you will know it as "Gaelic" rather than as "Irish", and this in itself illustrates part of the problem. Unless we consider the historical and political factors in some depth, we will fail to understand Ireland's motivation for seeking change to the EU language regime. Therefore we will begin by considering the complex historical and political story of Ireland's relationship to its language, which are in Ireland's case uniquely complex. We will go on to examine the actual usage of Irish in modern Ireland, as this is regularly mis-understood. Even diplomats on posting to Dublin are often led astray by the omnipresence of English, and the politeness of the Irish, who switch to English whenever foreigners are within earshot, into failing to notice that the Irish language is also in regular use in Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, the term EU will be used throughout this paper, though it has at various times been known as "Common Market", EEC/European Economic Community, EC/European Community, etc.

## 1. Constitutional Status and Historical Background

The Irish language is constitutionally the national and first official language of Ireland, the other official language being English, the language spoken daily by a large majority of people. The English version of of Article 8 of Bunreacht na hÉireann/The Constitution of Ireland reads:

1. "The Irish language as the national language is the first official language.
2. The English language is recognised as a second official language. "

Irish is one of the three "Gaelic" languages, but referring to it as "Gaelic", "Gälisch", "gaélique" etc. is generally considered derogatory by Irish speakers, or designed to allocate it a peripheral role in present-day Ireland. Irish has been spoken in Ireland for over 2,500 years, and is the language from which most Irish placenames and surnames derive:

Dublin < *Dubh-linn*, meaning "black pool" (the city's name in modern Irish is *Baile Átha Cliath*, "the town of the ford of the hurdles");  
Belfast < *Béal Feirste*, "sea-inlet of the sandbanks";  
Derry < *Doire Cholm Cille*, "the oak-grove of St. Colm Cille";  
Kennedy < *Ó Cinnéide*, "ugly head"; or  
McDonald < *Mac Dónaill*, "son of Dónall", etc.).

Irish is the ancestral language of the 70-million-strong Irish diaspora, and of most Scots, throughout the world, as it was once spoken in most of Scotland too.

As regards **Northern Ireland**, the parties to the Belfast Agreement of 10 April 1998 agreed that the British Government will "take resolute action to promote the language", both through recognising its status and providing financial assistance, in areas ranging from television and film to Irish-medium education. The concept of "parity of esteem" between the two communities in Northern Ireland is fundamental to the increased prominence of Irish in recent years, as it is recognised as an important heritage language by almost all of the Catholic, Irish nationalist, community, and by at least 20% of the Protestant community, which has primarily a British allegiance.

## 2. Nature and Development of Irish

Irish and its offshoots, Scottish Gaelic and Manx, constitute the Gaelic or Goidelic branch of the Celtic languages. Welsh, Cornish and Breton and the now extinct Gaulish (the language spoken in France, then called Gaul, before the country was invaded by Caesar's Roman legions) form the Brythonic or Brittonic group, and all Celtic languages form part of the Indo-European family of languages. Related Celtic languages were spoken by the Galatians in Anatolia (modern Turkey) to whom St. Paul wrote his letters; and in the Polish Galicja and Spanish Galicia, giving some idea of the vast area peopled by the Celts in the pre-Christian era.

Our earliest evidence for Irish is to be found in **ogham** inscriptions (a system of writing used mainly on stone or wood, based on vertical and slanted strokes corresponding to the Latin letters, and in the words of Professor David Greene

dating from “a time not much before the fourth century A.D.”. The language is usually divided into the following periods: Old Irish AD c. 650-900, Middle Irish c. 900-c.1200, Early Modern Irish c. 1200 - c. 1600, Late Modern Irish c. 1600 - .

From the Old Irish period until the 13th century the language underwent a prolonged period of regularization and simplification. Although they had existed in the language since earliest times, dialects do not come into view to any degree until the 17th century. This is because the literary standard language was common to the entire Gaelic-speaking area, which for over a thousand years consisted of all of Ireland, most of Scotland, and the Isle of Man. Irish migration to northern Britain had begun even before the Roman withdrawal in 410 A.D., but the process of Irish expansion gathered momentum after the establishment of the kingdom of Dál Riata around 500 A.D. In 843 A.D. Cineadh Mac Ailpin, king of the Irish-speaking people in northern Britain, gained accession to the kingship of the Picts, effectively becoming king of what we now call Scotland. Indeed the medieval Latin word “*Scotus*” meant simply an Irish speaker, as evidenced by the name of the 9th century philosopher at the court of Charles the Bald, Johannes Scotus Eriugena (Latin “born in Ireland”).

### **3. Literature in Irish**

The Irish language produced the oldest written literature north of the Alps, and has an unbroken literary tradition of over 14 centuries: the oldest text which can be dated with certainty, the *Amra Choluim Cille*, the life of St. Colm Cille, was written in 597 A.D. Ireland thus has the oldest vernacular literature in western Europe. The earliest writings in Irish, consisting of glosses or explanations of the Latin gospels, and sometimes amusing poems written in their margins, may be seen at the University Library in Würzburg, Germany.

The present state of Irish literature is anomalous since the reading public for Irish is small, but the output in both verse and prose is relatively large (around 130 new titles appear each year). The contemporary literature is varied in content and much of it compares favourably with writing in English in Ireland. The 12-volume French language “*Patrimoine littéraire européen*” (Europe’s Literary Heritage), edited in 1992 by Prof. Jean-Claude Polet of l’Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium, an anthology of European literature from the Atlantic to the Urals and from the beginning of written literature to the 20th Century, devotes 4.89% of its content to literature in the Irish language.

### **4. Some linguistic properties of Irish, compared with other languages**

My comparisons are with Polish, the Slavic language with which I am most familiar, but many of these features may also be present in Slovak. Irish is very unlike other European languages in syntax and idiom. It lacks any single words for “yes” or “no”, the question being repeated instead. Thus the answer to “Did you see him”? is either *Chonaic* (“I saw”) or *Ní fhaca* (“I did not see”). The distinction in Polish and other Slavic languages between *ona jest* and *ona bywa* (“she is” and “she habitually is” or “she is in the habit of being”), i.e. between the present and present habitual tenses, corresponds precisely to the Irish *tá sí* and *bíonn sí*. There are effectively 3 forms of the verb “to be” where English and other Western European languages have one, for example:

I am Irish: *Is Gael mé.*

I am tired: *Tá tuirse orm* (lit. "is tiredness on me")

I am here every day: *Bím anseo gach lá.*

The *is/tá* distinction corresponds almost exactly to the difference between the Spanish verbs *ser/estar*. Irish has no verb "to have", and Russian avoids the use of this verb, e.g.

English: I have a book.

Irish: *Tá leabhar agam*, lit. "is book with-me"

Russian: *U m'inja kn'jiga*. "with me book".

Irish, like Greek, Hebrew, and Esperanto, has only one article, the definite, singular *an* and plural *na*. Initial mutations in Irish are quite complex and the following is merely one example to illustrate the phenomenon. The singular article changes the initial consonant of feminine nouns: *bean*, pronounced /ban/, "a woman", *an bhean*, pronounced /on van/, "the woman"; it prefixes a "t" to masculine nouns beginning with a vowel: *asal*, "donkey", *an t-asal*.

## 5. The use of Irish today

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The first decision of the first government of the Irish Free State in 1922 was that all elementary and second-level schools should teach Irish to all pupils for at least one hour per day. Additionally, it was decided that all work for the first two years of primary school should be in Irish only. The number of individuals and families who speak Irish, particularly in Dublin and Belfast, is slowly growing, but Irish remains under unremitting pressure from English. Yet, as Prof. Joe Lee wrote, "the seemingly inevitable victory of the big battalions continues to be postponed", for centuries, one might add. Asked if the Irish language was dying, the greatest Irish language prose writer in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the late Máirtín Ó Cadhain replied: "Yes, it has been dying for over 400 years."

An important factor in maintaining Irish as the everyday language of the *Gaeltacht* is the negative influence of incoming English-speaking families. Recent planning law has shown an increasing awareness by the State of its responsibility for the linguistic as well as the physical environment, and the need to protect the *Gaeltacht* from the uncontrolled influx of English-speakers. Throughout the *Gaeltacht*, or English-speaking part of the country, both the prestige of Irish, and the number who habitually speak it, particularly in Dublin and Belfast, continues to grow. Since the achievement of independent Irish statehood the State has made various provisions for the maintenance and promotion of the language. All surveys show that a large majority of the population today values the Irish language as Ireland's national language and as an important part of the national heritage.

In a national sample survey conducted by the Linguistics Institute of Ireland in 1993, 9% said that they had used Irish in a conversation in the past week; 13% spoke Irish at home at least occasionally; 5% spoke Irish at work (2% at least weekly and 3% less than weekly; 12% watched programmes in Irish on TV daily or a few times weekly while 28% watched them less often. Some 15% listened to Raidió na

Gaeltachta (4% daily or a few times weekly and 11% less often); 15% listened to other radio programmes in Irish; 16% read Irish language columns in daily newspapers (5% daily or a few times weekly and 11% less often); 7% read books in Irish (1% daily or a few times weekly and 6% less often).

The 2002 Census showed 1.54 million people, or **43%**, claiming a knowledge of Irish, but only 73,000, or **2.6%** of the population (apart from schoolchildren who use it in school), speaking it daily. A hopeful sign is that among pre-school children, aged 3-4, i.e. those not yet attending school, the percentage speaking Irish daily is **5.4%**. It is very significant that among children aged 3-4, the percentage speaking Irish daily increased from **4.6%** in 1996 to **5.4%** in 2002.

The *Official Languages Act, 2003* guarantees the right of all Irish citizens to communicate with the State in either Irish or English, and provides mechanisms to ensure that this right is respected by public officials. It also provided for the simultaneous publication of important official documents such as annual reports or policy statement in both languages. A new development is provision for a complaints mechanism for citizens who believe their right to use Irish has been ignored, and penalties for state and semi-state bodies and individual officials who are found not to have shown due respect for the national language.

There are 251 primary schools and 37 secondary schools in Ireland which teach the national curriculum through Irish. The primary schools are attended by around 29,000 pupils and the secondary schools are attended by around 9,000 pupils. In Northern Ireland around 2,500 pupils receive their education through Irish in 2 secondary schools, 18 primary schools and 39 pre-schools.

According to *Nielsen*, the organisation which researches television viewership in Ireland, the Irish language television service *TG4* has a reach of over 800,000 viewers on average each night and a share of over 3.5% of television viewers during peak viewing hours. *Raidió na Gaeltachta* broadcasts nationally from Gaeltacht areas, and *Raidió na Life* is Dublin's Irish language radio service. Turning to publishing, some 130 new titles appear annually, 1 daily newspaper, one weekly newspaper and a number of monthly magazines are published in Irish, and Irish language columns appear regularly in the English-language press. Further information about the Irish language today can be found on the websites of the all-Ireland Irish language promotion body *Foras na Gaeilge* ([www.forasnagaeilge.ie](http://www.forasnagaeilge.ie)) and the Irish language television station *TG4* ([www.tg4.ie](http://www.tg4.ie)).

## **6. The European Dimension - What were the circumstances which led to full EU status for Irish?**

When Ireland joined on 1 January 1973, Irish acquired a unique status as a "treaty language", though not an official working language, of the EU. This meant that primary legislation, such as the Treaty of Rome and subsequent treaties, would have an Irish version which would, from a legal viewpoint, be equally authentic to the version in the official working languages. During accession negotiations Ireland had sought a status of "official but not working" language for Irish, but this was not agreed, as a number of member states feared that such a decision could have

implications for the status of their own languages. An additional complication was that Ireland's first representative in the European Court of Justice, Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh, who later became President of Ireland, actually secured official working language status for Irish, but only at the European Court of Justice.

Why did Irish not become an official working language of the EU when Ireland joined on 1 January 1973? A decision to add it would have been in line with the handling of the official language of all other member states, both before and since.<sup>2</sup> The official reason given by Ireland's negotiators in 1972 was that its use as a full EU working language would give rise to "certain practical difficulties". One is led to the conclusion that the negotiating team was influenced by the fact that all Irish people, with almost no exceptions, can understand and speak English. The exclusion of Irish would not, therefore, lead to any communicative difficulties. There is some evidence that others might have been asked to consider following Ireland's example, but that they replied that they would only drop the use of their native language if all others did likewise. In the end this idea was not pursued.

In subsequent years it became increasingly clear that the 1972 decision was not satisfactory. It did not take account of a number of factors:

- 1) For employment in many EU institutions there has traditionally been a requirement of a knowledge of two other EU languages among applicants. The 1972 decision meant that Irish would not count towards this employment condition, despite the Irish state's requirement that all children study Irish in all state-funded schools at primary and post-primary level. The contradiction apparent here increased the unease of many Irish citizens with the EU status of Irish.
- 2) The perception that Irish did not have a role in "Europe" was beginning to militate against the language's status within Ireland. Certain peripheral groups were quoting this among their arguments for decreasing the position of Irish within the educational system. This added to the unease of a large body of opinion, and ran counter to the general strengthening of the language in Ireland north and south over the past 30 years (see below) including, encouragingly, in areas where the language had not enjoyed a strong profile. The latter included factors such as an Irish-language TV service, TG4, since 1996; a daily newspaper in Irish since 2003, the phenomenal growth of Gaelscoileanna, the Irish-medium schools, since 1972; culminating in the enactment of the Official Languages Act, 2003.
- 3) The EU enlargement of 2004, with the advent of 10 new member states and 9 new official working languages, was widely perceived in Ireland as an opportunity to review the 1972 decision about the Irish language. The addition of the languages of new member states contributed to making the language question a real political issue.

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<sup>2</sup> Lëtzebuergesch, which became an official language of Luxembourg in 1984 and had previously been considered a Frankish dialect, is only a partial exception, as it did not have official status when Luxembourg joined the EU.

This situation fed into a tradition of popular support for Irish and of protest about language matters in Ireland which goes back at least a century. *Conradh na Gaeilge*, the main Irish language organisation, which was founded in 1893, led and won two major campaigns in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to have Irish taught as a core subject in schools, and to have it made an essential subject for entry to the new National University of Ireland. The latter campaign brought over 100,000 onto the streets of Dublin, and succeeded in making Irish an essential condition for university entry. The latter came into effect in 1913, some nine years before the first internationally-recognised Irish government was established.

## **EU Enlargement 2004**

The years leading up to the 2004 EU enlargement saw a renaissance of this tradition on street protest, following an extremely professional and effective lobbying campaign carried out by an organisation called “Stádas” (status), based on the support of all political parties in both houses of parliament, on the support of all local authorities throughout Ireland, and in April 2004 thousands were back on the streets of Dublin bearing placards in all 20 EU languages calling for “OFFICIAL STATUS FOR IRISH NOW”. The campaign made wide use of the Internet: a petition containing over 80,000 signatures was presented to the Irish government at the April 2004 march. The language campaign had called for a change of government policy during the Irish presidency of the EU Council in the first half of 2004. The policy approach of the Irish Government needed to be carefully developed and then explained to all Member States, given that consensus is required to amend Regulation 1/1958 – the Regulation governing the official and working status of languages in the EU.

On 14 July 2004 the Irish Government, some two weeks after the end of the Irish presidency, decided to seek EU official working language status for Irish, and the process of examining the implications of this began within the EU in November 2004. A significant detail is that the EU language regime, fixed by Council Regulation 1 of 15 April 1958, is one of the few areas where the right of initiative does not belong to the Commission, but to the member states. Another significant factor was that the Irish wish for change could build on a unique position whereby it enjoyed the status of both a national Constitutional language and an EU Treaty language. This already had certain practical effects. For instance, each of the Treaties had been translated into Irish, with the Irish version having equal legal validity to the version in the official working languages. A further example is the fact that Irish appeared on the EU common passport since its inception. The unusual, but very real, status of Irish within the EU had been further strengthened by the Treaty of Amsterdam 1997, which formally gave the right to Irish speakers to write to the EU institutions in Irish and to receive a reply in that language.

Aside from the possible intrinsic merits of such change, it was clearly in Ireland’s interest to stress the unique position of Irish as Ireland’s national language, as the only national language of Ireland, and as a language with a literary tradition dating from the late 6<sup>th</sup> Century.

## 8. Technical Organisation of the Campaign

An Inter-Departmental Committee, comprising representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs; Taoiseach (Prime Minister); Finance; Community, Rural and Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking districts) Affairs developed our policy approach. The Committee was chaired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Much of the work was via COREPER in Brussels, but it was paralleled by lobbying by the Irish embassies in all other EU capitals. The Irish Permanent Representative to the EU explained Ireland's approach to all of her COREPER colleagues. The Irish Permanent Representation to the EU had regular and intensive contact with the Council Secretariat, the Commission and the European Parliament. These meetings considered the detailed consequences of accepting the Irish proposal, both for translation and for interpretation. An early Irish decision was to take a pragmatic approach, by derogating from the complete application of translation and interpretation into and from Irish of all documents, and at all meetings, to a more realistic initial stage of concentrating on texts for co-decision of the Council and the European Parliament. This derogation would be reviewed at regular intervals, in line with the practical functioning of the new regime for Irish. The regime in force for Maltese provided a useful guide here. Costs were kept down wherever possible, and the eventual agreement foresaw the recruitment of some 30 translators and interpreters, at a cost of some € 3.5 million per year.

On 1 January 2007 the nameplates which designate the country at all EU meetings will change from "IRELAND" to "ÉIRE/IRELAND", bringing into usage the country's name in its national language, as it already appears on Irish euro coinage or postage stamps.

## 9. The importance of the decision for Ireland

Final agreement by the EU Council of Ministers on 13 June 2005 to grant full official working status to Irish was seen as a huge victory for the language. It is hard to exaggerate the psychological impact on Irish people of hearing their representatives address the EU Council of Ministers, or a plenary session of the European Parliament, in Irish. A language which had laws passed against it as long ago as 1366 has finally come in from the cold.

**END**

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## Resumo

*Kiel membroŝtato povas influi EU-lingvopolitikon – La kazo de la irlanda*

La artikolo celas klarigi kial, kaj kiel, Irlando sukcesis ŝanĝi la statuson de la irlanda lingvo en EU la 13-an de junio 2005, kaj, konsente kun la 24 aliaj EU-registaroj, igi la irlandan oficiala laborlingvo de EU. Krome ĝi provas klarigi la motivojn de Irlando, kiuj naskiĝis de la kompleksa historia kaj politika fono de lingvopolitiko kaj de la historio de la irlanda lingvo.

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**Seán Ó Riain** (Ph.D., Trinity College, Dublin) has published research on language planning in Ireland and Québec (Ó Riain 1994). His diplomatic career has included Poland, Australia, Austria, Germany and now the EU, Brussels. The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ireland, Brian Cowen, launched his booklet on EU language policy (Ó Riain 2001) on 12 July 2001.