

## THE IRISH LANGUAGE, Maribor, 2 October 2004

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### Introduction

The Irish language is the national and first official language of Ireland, the other official language being English. 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  
MacDonald < *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 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. It is a treaty but not an official working language of the European Union and, as such, appears on all EU passports. On 14 July 2004 the Irish Government decided to seek EU official working language status for Irish. The Treaty of Amsterdam gave the right to Irish speakers to write to the EU institutions in Irish and to receive a reply in that language.

### Similarities between the Polish and Irish languages

The following comparison may also apply to Slovene and other Slavic languages, but I compare with Polish, as the Slavic language I know best.

The distinction in Polish 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 exactly to the Irish *tá sí* and *bíonn sí*. This distinction is not found verbally in English, French or German, but is present in other Celtic languages such as Welsh, Breton, Scottish Gaelic, and in other Slavic languages. There are effectively 3 forms of the verb “to be”, 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.**

Both Polish and Irish have a fondness for palatalisation: the palatal quality of the consonant “n” in the Polish word *nie* corresponds to the “n” of the Irish word *níl*, “there is not”.

Finally a number of verbal endings, such as the first person singular, present tense, and the second person singular, past tense, are pronounced similarly in both languages:

**Polish:** *jestem* (I am now) *bywam* (I am usually) *by a* (you were)

**Irish:** *táim* (I am now) *bím* (I am usually) *bhís* (you were)

### **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").

Irish and indeed the Celtic languages in general are very unlike other European languages in syntax and idiom. Irish 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"). Irish does not emphasize by use of intonation, as in English, but by bringing the item to be emphasized to the head of its clause after the copula (one of the verbs "to be"): "I don't live in Belfast any more" is rendered *Ní i mBéal Feirste atá cónaí orm a thuilleadh* (lit. "It is not in Belfast that dwelling is on-me any more"). Similarly "Do you want a stamp"? is *An stampa atá uait?*, literally "Is it a stamp that is from-you"? Irish is a noun-centred language where

English tends to be verb-centred: “she slept” is expressed in Irish by *bhí sí ina codladh*, “she was in her sleeping”; “I am very hungry” is *tá ocras mór orm*, “there is a great hunger on me”; “you owe me a pound” is *tá punt agat orm*, “there is a pound at you on me” or “you have a pound on me”. There is no Irish verb “to have” but there are effectively three verbs to be:

- she is here now: **tá** sí anseo anois.
- she is here every day: **bíonn** sí anseo gach lá.
- she is Irish: **is** Éireannach í.

The *tá/bíonn* distinction corresponds exactly to the **Polish** *jest/bywa*; the *is/tá* distinction corresponds almost exactly to the **Spanish** *ser/estar*. “To have” is expressed as follows: “I have a book”, *tá leabhar agam*, literally “there is a book at me”, similar to **Russian** “*u menya kniga*”.

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*. The changes which occur at the beginning of Irish words are as complex as Polish “koncówki”!

A further feature which distinguishes Irish and the other Celtic languages from all other Indo-European languages (although it is a feature shared with **Arabic** and **Hebrew**) is the existence of what are called prepositional pronouns. Prepositions combine with personal pronouns, e.g. *ar*, “on” + *mé* = *orm*, “on me”; *le*, “with” + *sí*, “she” = *léi*, “with her”; *ó*, “from” + *sé*, “he” = *uidh*, “from him”.

Although Irish was not much cultivated during the 19th century, its status as an official language since 1922 has helped to modernize it. All writers now employ the *Caighdeán Oifigiúil* or Official Standard, a regularized spelling and grammar developed by the translation staff or the *Oireachtas*, the Irish Parliament. The terminological committees of the Department of Education have over the years provided speakers of Irish with technical vocabulary in a wide range of subjects. The *Gaeltacht* radio service, *Raidió na Gaeltachta*, and since 1996 the Irish language television service *TG4*, have disseminated much modern terminology as well as familiarizing native speakers with dialects other than their own.

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 all work for the first two years of primary school was to be in Irish only. The number of individuals and families who speak Irish, particularly in Dublin and Belfast, is slowly but constantly growing.

### 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.

### **The use of Irish today**

The first decision of the first government of the Irish Free State in 1922 was that each primary and secondary school should teach Irish for at least one hour per day to all pupils. In addition, all of the work of the first two years at primary schools was to be conducted in Irish. Today the number of Irish speakers in the *Gaeltacht* continues to fall for various reasons. Some of the local population switch to English because of the influence of incoming English-speaking families. On the other hand, the number of individuals and families who habitually speak Irish, 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. Efforts to revive the language as the first spoken language were not successful. They faced the difficulties that by the time independence was achieved Irish was very much a minority language, nearly all of the speakers of which were competent in English, and that the areas in which it was still spoken as the preferred community language (mainly on the western seaboard) were quite small. However, 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, while 71% never did; 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 and 60% never watched TV programmes in Irish. 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 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, the

percentage speaking Irish daily is **5.4%**. It is very significant that 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 mechanism to ensure that this right is respected by public officials.

There are 235 primary schools and 37 secondary schools in Ireland which teach the national curriculum through Irish only. 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 Teilifís na Gaeilge has a reach of over 300,000 viewers on average each night and a share of over one per cent 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.

Some 130 new titles annually, 1 daily newspaper (publishes in Belfast, Northern Ireland!), one weekly newspaper and a number of monthly magazines are published in Irish, and Irish language columns appear regularly in the English-language press.

### **Hiberno-English**

The influence of Irish on Hiberno-English, the English spoken in Ireland, is considerable, whether we are dealing with pronunciation, syntax or morphology. Hiberno-English tends to have pure vowel sounds, as in Irish, Polish and most Continental languages, making it easier to pronounce, and clearer, for foreign learners of English. It avoids the diphthongisation of RP English. For example, the three words "cap, cup, carp" are pronounced quite distinctly in Hiberno-English, whereas to the Continental ear they tend to sound the same in the RP (Received Pronunciation) which is the prestige variety of spoken English in England (used by about 2 % of the population of England, according to Professor David Crystal's Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language).

In syntax the more flexible Irish word order is reflected in Hiberno-English in such phrases as "is it to Cork you are going tomorrow?" or "is it tomorrow you are going to Cork?", depending on the element it is desired to stress. Standard English tends to have a more rigid word order, using only voice inflection to stress particular elements of a sentence. Incidentally, the Irish, or more generally Celtic, flexibility in word order is reflected in French "*C'est demain que tu vas à Cork?*", and it is now increasingly recognised that French word order has been far more influenced by its Gaulish predecessor than had hitherto been supposed.

The range of verbal possibilities in Hiberno-English is also increased by its adoption of non-standard patterns, deriving from Irish, in its verbal system (e.g. "I do be", to compensate for the absence of a habitual present tense in English (see below) or "I

was after getting married”, influenced by the Irish *bhíos tar éis pósadh*, “I was after marrying”.

Many Irish idioms survive in Hiberno-English: “Tis true for you” (*is fíor duit*); “Not a bother on me” (*ní gearánta dom*), “he was putting in on me” (*bhí sé ag cur isteach orm*) for “he was interfering with me”; “he’s very near himself” (*gar dó féin*) for “he’s very selfish”; “who is the bike with?” (*cé leis an rothar?*) for “who owns the bike?”, “is it yourself that’s in it?” (*an tú féin atá ann?*) for “is it you?”, etc.

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## Mini-course in Irish

1. **Verb “to be”:** I am Seán: Is mise Seán.  
Who are you? Cé hé tusa?  
Are you X? Yes/No. An tusa X? Is mé/Ní mé.  
Are you a teacher? Yes/No. An múinteoir tú? Is ea/Ní hea.  
  
Are you tired? Yes/No. An bhfuil tuirse ort? Tá/Níl.  
Are you here every day? Yes/No. An mbíonn tú anseo gach lá? Bí/ní bhím.
2. **Verb “to have”:** Have you a book? Yes/No. An bhfuil leabhar agat?  
Tá/Níl.
3. **Numerals:** a haon, a dó, a trí, a ceathair, a cúig, a sé, a seacht, a hocht, a naoi, a deich
4. **Greetings:** Hello! - Dia dhuit! Dia is Muire dhuit!  
Goodbye! – Slán.
5. **Polite words:** Thank you (very much) – Go raibh (míle) maith agat.  
Cheers! – Sláinte!

## 6. Necessary Phrases:

Where is ... ? – Cá bhfuil? (sráid, stáisiún na traenach, busáras, fón, caife idirlín, banc).

What time is it? – Cén t-am é?

How much? – Cé mhéad?

How are you? – Conas tá tú?

What is that? – Cad é sin?

Do you speak English/Esperanto? - An bhfuil Béarla/Esperanto agat?

I don't speak your language. – Níl do theanga agam.

I don't know. – Níl a fhios agam.

I don't understand. – Ní thuigim.

I love you. – Mo ghrá thú.

## 7. Other necessary words:

Bread-arán; milk-bainne; and-agus; friend-cara; language-teanga; learn-foghlaim; answer-freagair; ask-fiafraigh/iarr; father-athair; mother-máthair; love-grá.