Progress and problems in language revitalization: the Celtic languages

Pavel Iosad

p.iosad@ulster.ac.uk

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1 Plan

- Recent approaches to language revitalization

- Continuity of tradition(s): the case of Celtic

- The revitalization of Celtic languages: progress

- The revitalization of Celtic languages: problems

2 The Celtic languages

- Spoken in the British Isles and Brittany (north-western France)

- Principal community languages in their respective regions until at least the early modern age (later in many cases)

- Decline in share of speakers since then

- Two main groups

  - Goidelic ('Q-Celtic'), descended from Old Irish
    * Irish
    * Scottish (Gaelic)
    * Manx
  - Brythonic ('P-Celtic')
    * Welsh
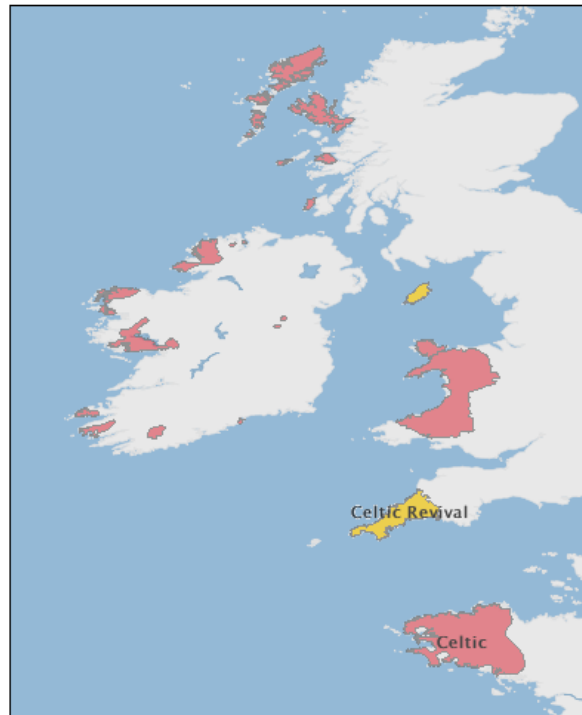   * Breton
    * Cornish

Figure 1: The Celtic languages today

3   General approaches to language revitalization

3.1   Language policy, language planning, and RLS

- 'Language revitalization' (language revival, language reclamation) is 'the phenomenon of attempting to bring endangered languages back to some level of use within their communities (and elsewhere) after a period of reduction in usage' (Hinton 2011, p. 291)

- An alternative term, due to Fishman (e. g. 1991, 2001), is 'reversing language shift' (RLS)

- An important distinction in RLS-related activities is that between language policy and language planning (Sallabank 2011)

  - Language policy: top-down measures driven by official bodies
  - Language planning (also language management; Spolsky 2009): bottom-up, grassroots-level activities

- Under these definitions, official recognition for RLS organizations means they switch from 'planning' to 'policy' (McCoy 2001; Mac Murchaidh 2008)

- Language policy: the absence of an explicit policy is also policy by stealth: '*Laissez-faire* policies mean that the languages of power and prestige will eventually take over in all situations of contact.' (Wright 2004)

- Types of language planning (following Sallabank 2011)

    - Corpus planning: documentation, orthography development, codification and standardization, production of dictionaries and learners' materials
    - Status planning: securing official recognition, expanding the domains of usage
    - Language-in-education planning (acquisition planning): increasing the number of speakers of the language through education
    - Prestige planning and image planning: improving attitudes to the language

3.2 Ideologies of RLS

- Fishman (1991) stresses the importance of *prior ideological clarification* for RLS

- Most RLS movements at least state the aim of restoring language use and transmission in the family

- Although probably the best one can hope for is the coexistence of the endangered language with the majority language in prestige domains (Fishman 2001; Wmffre 2001)

- In practice many RLS movements end up focusing on ensuring that the language is taught in schools and receives some official approval (Fishman 1991)

3.3 Levels of endangerment

- Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), proposed by Fishman (1991)

☞ See Grenoble (2011) for other approaches to determining the level of endangerment

- GIDS was developed on the basis of work with languages in a similar situation to the Celtic ones (and indeed on the Celtic ones)

- It has been criticized for being less applicable in other situations (Hinton 2011), but it will do for us

- Crucial point: moving to steps 1–4 usually requires passing 5–8 first

4 Continuity of tradition(s): the Celtic case

- Turning to Celtic, two issues stand out

    - Continuity of spoken tradition: is the language preserved well enough for GIDS stages 5–8?
    - Continuity of written tradition: how much corpus planning is necessary?

- Provisionally, we can arrange the Celtic languages as in table 2

- As we shall see, it is necessary to make a distinction between 'learner' and 'heartland' varieties

1.	Education, work sphere, mass media, and government operations at higher and nationwide levels
2.	Local/regional mass media and governmental services
3.	The local/regional (i. e. non-neighbourhood) work sphere, both among Xmen and Ymen
4b.	Public schools for Xish children, offering some instruction via Xish, but substantially under Yish curricular and staffing control
4a.	Schools in lieu of compulsory education and substantially under Xish curricular and staffing control

II. RLS to transcend diglossia, subsequent to its attainment

5.	Schools for literacy acquisition, for the old and for the young, and not in lieu of compulsory education
6.	The intergenerational and demographically concentrated home — family — neighbourhood: the basis of mother tongue transmission
7.	Cultural interaction in Xish primary involving the community-based older generation
8.	Reconstructing Xish and adult acquisition of X Standard Language

I. RLS to attain diglossia (assuming prior ideological clarification)

Table 1: Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale

Language	Spoken	Written
Welsh H-Irish H-Scottish	Good	Good
L-Irish L-Scottish Manx (L-Welsh?)	Poor	Good
Breton	Good	Poor
Cornish	Poor	Poor (?)

Table 2: Continuity of traditions in the Celtic case

4.1 Irish

- Extensive support in terms of language policy and corpus planning (see the relevant papers in Nic Pháidín and Ó Cearnaigh 2008)

    - Official language of the Republic of Ireland, recognized under the ECRML in Northern Ireland
    - But the RoI government has refused to ratify the ECRML for Irish, citing its status as the country's 'first official language'
    - Compulsory in RoI for schools receiving public funds, opportunities for Irish-medium education at least through secondary level on both sides of the border
    - Codified standard (*an Caighdeán Oifigiúil*)
    - Extensive presence in publishing, media and the public space (especially in RoI)
    - ☞ But this is not uncontroversial: the current provision of Irish-language broadcasting (TG4, Raidió na Gaeltachta) is due to sustained campaigning to counter the decline of Irish-language programming

- Relatively strong as a community language in (some) *Gaeltachtaí*,[1] predominantly remote and rural areas subject to economic and demographic pressures (Ó Giollagáin and Mac Donnacha 2008)

- Punch (2008) reports that in the 2006 census out of 72,000 people who spoke Irish daily outside the education system, 49,500 lived outside *Gaeltacht* areas

- Issues around attitudes

    - Mixed reactions to official support in RoI (e. g. Mac Murchaidh 2008)
    - Highly politicized environment in NI (e. g. Andrews 2000; McCoy 2001)
    - ☞ Support for Irish is explicitly included as part of the peace process under the Belfast Agreement, which perhaps contributes to politicization

- The political border complicates both policy and planning, although some progress is being made by all-Ireland agencies (e. g. Foras na Gaeilge)

4.2 Scottish

- Some support in terms of language policy and corpus planning (Dunbar 2010)

☞ No ultra-official standard like the CO for Irish, but broad consensus in practice

☞ Less need for standardization because of smaller dialect divisions and widespread literacy among heartland speakers

- Presence in the media and the public space

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1. A *Gaeltacht*, plural *Gaeltachtaí*, is an officially designated area where Irish is the primary language.

- Long-term demographic decline in *Gàidhealtachd* heartlands, significant migration to the urban centres, but still spoken as a community language (MacKinnon 2010)

- Access to Gaelic-medium education inside and (on a much smaller scale) outside the *Gàidhealtachd*

4.3 Manx

- Last native speaker famously died in 1974, with some semi-speakers living longer (Broderick 1999)

- Revival started by non-native speakers learning the language from the last native speakers, written tradition relatively unbroken

- Small (but growing) numbers claiming some knowledge

- Widely taught as a subject, one Manx-medium primary school (*Bunscoill Ghaelgagh*)

- Relatively high prestige as part of the Manx identity

4.4 Welsh

- Official status in Wales, with compulsory bilingualism for public services

- Extensive support in terms of both policy and planning (see relevant papers in Williams 2000 with a recent update in R. O. Jones and Williams 2009)

- This is, however, the result of an extensive and at times extremely contentious political process (cf. the Teilifís na Gaeilge/TG4 campaigns in RoI)

- Rising number of speakers in the 2001 census, with a small fall in the 2011 one (albeit it is still unclear to what extent this is a matter of language shift vs. demographics)

- Compulsory as a school subject, access to Welsh-medium education at all levels across the country

- Wide availability of Welsh courses for adults

- Broad presence in the arts, media, and public space (albeit with strong competition from English in all these areas)

- Conservative but widely accepted written standard coexists with an emerging, largely uncodified vernacular koine, with some (supra)regional variation (King 1993; Jones 1998)

- Community language in large swathes of the (rural) north and west, weakening position in the rural south, large absolute numbers of both native speakers and learners in the urban centres (Pryce 2000; H. Jones and Williams 2000)

4.5   Breton

- Relatively large numbers of speakers, but the overwhelming majority are elderly; intergenerational transmission has all but stopped (e. g. Broudic 1995)

- Some support in terms of language policy (with much tokenism, cf. Hornsby 2008)

- Highly fragmented corpus planning: 'orthographic wars' (Wmffre 2007a, 2007b), lack of continuous written tradition

- Gap between 'standard Breton(s)' and the Breton of traditional native speakers (Hewitt 1973; Jones 1995; Le Dû 1997; Wmffre 2007b): essentially broken oral continuity

- Widely taught in schools, availability of bilingual and Breton-medium school education (in the modern standard)

4.6   Cornish

- Revived language (i. e. started at GIDS stage 8)

- Recognized by the UK government under ECRML, supported by Cornwall County Council

- Problematic corpus planning, with competing RLS movements based on different ideological premises

    - Unified Cornish (Revised): continuity with the Middle Cornish written tradition
    - Kernewek Kemmyn: a reconstruction of Middle Cornish phonology, with little attention to orthographic continuity
    - Late Cornish: continuity with the final stages of the language

- Recent compromise (Standard Written Form) starting to bear fruit

- No fully Cornish-medium education, classes and correspondence courses widely available

5   Some problems

- We concentrate on three issues here, all related to the ever more widely acknowledged fact that urban speakers, including learners, are highly likely to be the long-term future of the languages

    - The relationship between the oral and written standards
    - The relationship between native and learner varieties
    - Language sustainability outside the heartlands

- A recurring theme will be the necessity to understand the 'internal' processes that are not strictly speaking related to language death or language shift (e. g. Dorian 1989; Jones 1998)

5.1   Oral and written standards

- Access to a continuous oral tradition is important to fill in gaps in the prescriptions of the written standard

- Even for languages with an extensive descriptive and prescriptive tradition some grounding in living speech is inevitable (e. g. Morris Jones 1993)

- Welsh

  - The traditional standard does not regulate vocabulary very strictly, meaning that dialectal differences at least in that area are allowed
  - The emerging vernacular explicitly makes provisions for regional variation, with learners being instructed to 'follow the local variety'
  - A proposed pandialectal standard (*Cymraeg Byw*) was widely ridiculed and did not really take root
  - However, in reality regional differences are being obliterated ('dialect death'; Jones 1998)
  - ☞ This is a worry for the underpinning of the standard

- Irish

  - The *caighdeán oifigiúil* is quite consciously an artificial compromise standard, and makes provision for the use of non-prescribed dialectal forms
  - However, the CO regulates mostly morphology and mutation, making no provision for syntax (for which Na Bráithre Críostaí 1960 is an authoritative but obviously incomplete source)
  - There is a proposed artificial pronunciation standard (*an Lárchánuint*), but it has not caught on very much (Mac Mathúna 2008)
  - Education in RoI traditionally perpetuates dialect distinctions
  - ☞ Lack of clarity on the type of Irish taught to non-native speakers
  - ☞ Lack of a clear reference point when comparing L-Irish and H-Irish

- Still, both Welsh and Irish (and, in practice, Scottish Gaelic; Lamb 2008) have a broad range of registers from very local dialect to commonly accepted standard

- Not so with Breton

  - Modern standard Breton is founded on a clean break with whatever written tradition the language had in the early modern era due to its perceived 'contamination' by French and bias towards the Léonais dialect
  - Rejection of a dialectal grounding by many activists for reasons of ideological purity (Wmffre 2007a)

– At the same time there is a desire to accommodate speakers (learners) from many regions rather than impose a consciously artificial norm

– The net result is pandialectal orthographies with many inconsistencies (similar to the failed *Cymraeg Byw*)

– No real codification of pronunciation (Madeg 2010), highly purist lexicon (Hewitt 1973)

– Very little underpinning of the written standard — the only real way to new speakers — by traditional speech

5.2 Learners vs. traditional speakers

- With so much of the transmission of the languages happening outside the traditional heartlands, there is a growing recognition that 'learner varieties' are here to stay

- The differences between learners' varieties and 'traditional' varieties are often seen as incomplete acquisition due to interference (*Gaelscoilis*; Mac Mathúna 2008)

- However, given sufficient exposure (e. g. immersion education) learners acquire (almost) native-like competence (e. g. Jones 1998)

- And even where the end state is not native-like due to insufficient input, the mechanism is not necessarily due to interference from the dominant language (Henry and Tangney 1999)

- More needs to be done to understand the nature of the differences between the two types of varieties, and adjust planning activities accordingly

- Related issue: how are learners motivated? Why do they identify with the language? What is their role in the community? (Trosset 1986; Wmffre 2004; MacCaluim 2007)

    – Human rights: the right of an individual to speak the language that they want to speak and of the minority-language community to exist

        * Arguably the main (but not the only) motivation behind the relatively successful RLS movement in Wales (Phillips 2000)

        * In Wales, language-rights campaigning preceded (and probably sustained) the breakthrough of Welsh nationalism

        * But often seen as sentimental and disconnected from the 'real' needs of modern society

    – Political motivation: the political empowerment of the group identified with the language

        * Much of the original motivation for RLS activities in Ireland

        * Modern RLS in RoI goes back to the Gaelic League and similar efforts which piggybacked on existing movements for emancipation, land reform, the national state etc.

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☞ Co-opted for the construction of the Irish nation (like Gaelic sports, the literary Celtic Revival etc.); this is the converse of Wales

* Strongly politicized issue (on both sides) in Northern Ireland today (e. g. Andrews 2000; McCoy 2001, 2006)

* Political differences are behind much of the Breton revival movement and its divisions (Wmffre 2007a)

– Language as an advantage

* Individual advantages of bilingualism

* Minority language communities seen as sources of expertise (Ruíz 1984)

• As planning activities become supported by the state, they may be perceived as élitist and breed a certain resentment even among traditional speakers (e. g. Hewitt 1973)

5.3   Sustainability outside the heartland

• Growth in the number of Celtic-language speakers (however defined) is mostly thanks to the education system

• There is a tension between the stated aim of ensuring transmission in the family and the necessity of doing the work to ensure the availability of education

• Some tendencies for the provision of education to obscure the initial ideological aims (Fishman 2001; Hinton 2011)

• Despite relatively big numbers outside the heartlands, the concentration of speakers, especially in urban areas, can be quite small (Pryce 2000; H. Jones and Williams 2000; Punch 2008; MacKinnon 2010)

• Arenas outside the home are important, both in the heartlands (MacKinnon 2009) and especially outside them

☞ Preferably not ones explicitly associated with maintaining the language and culture (e. g. post offices and shops rather than traditional music sessions)

• Some progress has been made, particularly in Wales and to some extent in Ireland, with quite vital (sub)cultures not positioned as part of 'traditional' practices

• Key challenges

– Ensuring that school leavers continue using the language once outside the educational system (Gruffudd 2000)

– Ensuring the transmission of the language, particularly in mixed families (e. g. Harrison, Bellin, and Piette 1981; MacKinnon 2009)

6   Conclusions

- With reference to reversing language shift, the Celtic languages stand in a relatively favourable position compared to many other languages of the world

    - Smaller pressures related to modernization due to a relatively advanced starting position (in some cases)

    - The existence of relatively vital communities of traditional speakers

    - Often strong written traditions

    - Support in terms of language policy and corpus planning

- All this has led to some success, especially in the education system

- The key challenge now is to translate it into ensuring the existence of sustainable communities of speakers both inside and outside the rural heartlands

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