

The Celtic Languages in the Age of Globalisation: Problems and Possibilities

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Introduction



Distribution of the habitual use of the Celtic languages

Source: http://tumblr_movsnvVI5o1rasnq9o1_500.jpg

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The map above gives a rough indication of the areas where the Celtic languages in the British Isles and Brittany are spoken. The Isle of Man and Cornwall are also indicated as areas where Celtic languages died out from habitual use, but in both regions there are active language revival movements of a few thousand members.

The Celtic languages form a branch of the Indo-European languages, alongside such groups as Romance, Germanic and Slavonic. To give a cursory indication of the relationship of Celtic to other languages, here are the number words from one to ten, plus a few other words, in Welsh and Scottish Gaelic for comparison with other Indo-European languages known to readers. Anyone who wishes to explore Celtic number words further could try <http://www.omniglot.com/language/numbers/celtic.htm> (accessed 15 November 2014).

	<i>Welsh</i>	<i>Scottish Gaelic</i>
1	un	aon
2	dau	dà
3	tri	tri
4	pedwar	ceithir
5	pump	cóig
6	chwech	sia
7	saith	seachd
8	wyth	ochd
9	naw	naoi
10	deg	deich
water	dwr	uisge
sea	mor	muir
bridge	pont	drochaid
wine	gwin	fion
juice	sudd	sùgh

At full size, the above map includes legible estimates of numbers of total and habitual speakers. However, numbers of native speakers and / or users of the Celtic languages are difficult to determine with any accuracy: census statements are notoriously subjective and influenced by personal ideological stances. Of the Celtic languages, only Welsh, with around 300 000 habitual speakers (over 500 000 claiming to know the language in the 2011 census), is not considered as endangered by UNESCO. Although Irish is supposed to have approaching two million people with some knowledge of the language, the number of habitual speakers is probably fewer than 50 000, with divergent dialects in the dark, mother-tongue, areas in the map. Breton, with under 200 000 mostly elderly speakers (perhaps as few as 30 000 using the language regularly), is under threat, and receives little support – some would say rather antagonism – from the French state. According to the the

2011 census, around 60 000 Scots claimed to speak Gaelic, approximately 1% of the population.

What I wish to concentrate on in this short paper, however – after a brief historical introduction – is the effect on the insular Celtic languages of recent changes in the UK Celtic areas, particularly the influence of devolution and modern communications. This is something which should be seen – in particular in the context of a potentially independent Scotland (a proposal defeated in the referendum held in September 2014) – against a wider international background, informed not only by globalization issues but also by socio-political developments in the national / regional areas. Interestingly, Welsh gained by far the most from UK devolution, even though the Welsh Assembly has significantly weaker powers than the Scottish Parliament. In a nation with around 20% of the population claiming significant knowledge of Welsh, the recent laws on language equality (which enforce bilingualism on many public facing functions) have radically changed the status and the acceptance of the Welsh language. Similar, but less intense, pressures have come to bear both in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The latter is a particularly interesting case, since the Irish language there has strong political and ideological connotations (namely, being associated – not always correctly – with the Roman Catholic religion and Republican tendencies). But in all the insular Celtic regions over the last few decades there have been extraordinary pressures to recognise the Celtic languages in schools, regional parliaments and assemblies, and the media. The latter element is particularly important, since only recently have Celtic language news channels reported on global, rather than very local – even parochial – events. The introduction of the Welsh language channel S4C in 1982 was particularly important: for the first time, international news was presented daily in Welsh, and the profile of the Welsh language benefited enormously. Modern information technologies have also enabled an increasing presence of the Celtic languages in an international arena.

Some History

The modern Celtic languages derive from the languages spoken in the British Isles before the Roman invasion. Two families exist: Brythonic and Goidelic, the latter developing in Ireland but then being exported to Scotland and the Isle of Man; indeed, a single literary language appears to have existed over the whole Gaelic-speaking area until the 15th century (although the detailed linguistic situation in the late medieval period is complex). Brythonic developed into modern Welsh and Cornish; Cornish settlers then introduced the language into Brittany. There is still a degree of mutual intelligibility between modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic, although not really enough to enable free communication; Welsh and Breton have some vocabulary in common, but have evolved very differently, in particular through the influence of English and French respectively.

With the expansion of the territories ruled by the English Crown, and therefore the English language, all the insular Celtic languages declined over a period of several centuries (while retaining an extraordinary literary tradition [1]). Education for those who spoke mother tongue Celtic languages varied enormously, and was greatly influenced by religious differences. In Ireland before independence, there was considerable pressure from Elizabethan times onwards to promote the use of English, rather than Irish. So-called 'hedge schools', associated with teaching by primarily rural Catholic intellectuals, taught not only Irish and general literacy, but also sometimes history and the classics. After Irish independence the language became, rather artificially, the official primary state language, and a compulsory subject in schools, but continued to decline rapidly as a mother tongue and as a language of everyday use. In Scotland, Gaelic was relegated to a very minor second place. Some have attributed the decline of Scottish Gaelic to religious differences, not simply between Catholic and Protestant, but also between Protestant denominations. In Wales the religious connection was much more positive. Overwhelmingly Methodist / Calvinist, Welsh Sunday Schools ensured a high level of literacy in the Welsh language in those areas where it was predominantly a mother tongue – as well as a degree of standardization owing to the Welsh Bible, translated almost as early as modern English versions (the most important being the William Morgan version of 1588). Another important influence was the existence of Welsh workers' political and cultural clubs in the old industries – particularly the slate quarries – often meeting during lunch breaks to discuss issues of the day.

Unsurprisingly, it was Wales where resistance to the increasing use of English was most pronounced. The 1960s saw campaigns by the Welsh Language Society on such matters as bilingual road signs, and an extraordinary couple (Eileen and Trevor Beasley) won a victory to have the right to communicate in Welsh with local government in Welsh-speaking areas – but only after years of court cases and the seizure of many of their possessions for unpaid local taxes and court fines. Finally, Gwynfor Evans, a Welsh Member of Parliament, threatened to fast to the death in 1980 if Welsh were not accorded reasonable rights, particularly a TV channel [2].

In recent years, the native Irish and Scottish Gaelic areas have lost their geographical integrity, and now represent rather a mosaic of small areas with comparatively high densities of speakers. With the loss of a continuous Gaeltacht / Gaidhealtachd (the native words in Irish and Gaelic for these areas), the passing on of the languages to younger people has become less and less common. The Irish language will continue to have an important political and even social function, owing to its special status within the Irish nation, as well as developments in schools (to be considered briefly below) but otherwise both languages appear to have a very threatened future. Is there any hope?

One Irish TV presenter, tried to test the current state of Irish in a novel way:

No Béarla [No speak English] is a four part series in which Manchán Magan attempts to live his life (eat, travel, socialise, find accommodation, shop, etc) through Irish. It is a journey to find out whether the 1.6 million people who claim they can speak Irish in the national census really can and whether one can survive in Ireland today without speaking a word of English.

In the course of his travels Manchán gets kicked out of bars, served the wrong food, given the wrong directions, the wrong clothes, the wrong haircut. He gets abused, insulted, treated as an imbecile. When his car breaks down he finds he can't get a mechanic – directory enquiries simply laugh at him. Likewise, he gets jeered at trying to chat up girls in a nightclub in Donegal. On the Shankill Rd, he is warned that he'll end up in hospital if he continues speaking the language. In Galway he tries busking, singing the filthiest, most debauched lyrics he can think of to see if anyone will understand - old ladies smile and tap their feet merrily as he serenades them with filth. In Killarney he stands outside a bank, promising passers-by huge sums of money if they help him rob it, but again no one understands. He may as well be speaking Klingon [3].

Clearly, this is rather tendentious, but it highlights the unease of many Irish citizens towards the Irish language. Irish schoolchildren spend many years studying Irish – but so do many UK schoolchildren studying French, although no one would expect to be able to get by in French in the UK. But Irish has a particular cultural connotation in the Republic, and for some citizens a lack of competence can become something approaching guilt.

Schools

It is worth making a few comments on the provision of Celtic-language medium schools, which have expanded in all the insular Celtic areas in the last decades. Although this is not a direct result of globalisation, it is a driver of a major shift in the demographics of Celtic-language speaking, and has significant consequences for the languages. Here are a few official positions from websites, in no particular order:

Northern Ireland

There are currently 29 Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland and a further 10 Irish-medium units attached to English-medium host schools. Of the 29 schools, 28 are primary and one is post primary, *Colaiste Feirste*. Of the 10 Irish-medium units attached to English-medium host schools, 7 are primary and 3 are post-primary. In addition to these, *Gaelscoil na Daróige* in Derry City is an independent school teaching through the medium of Irish.

There are a total of 4,633 pupils in Irish-medium education in 2012/13. This includes 803 children attending Irish Medium pre-school settings, 3,061 primary school children (Years 1-7) and 769 in post primary schools years (Years 8-14).

[...]

Sir George Bain, in the Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education (the Bain Report), December 2006, recommended that DE should develop a comprehensive and coherent policy for Irish-medium education.

The Department accepted this recommendation and initiated a major review of the development of Irish Medium Education to ensure high quality provision and outcomes for all children in the sector. The majority of recommendations are either achieved or progressed considerably. The Department is taking forward work on any recommendations which have not yet been fully implemented.

<http://www.deni.gov.uk/> Accessed 21/8/14

Republic of Ireland

Irish-medium education is one of the fastest growing fields of education in Ireland for over 30 years and *Gaelscoileanna Teo* are to the forefront in its development. There are approximately 40,000 pupils receiving education through the medium of Irish outside of the *Gaeltacht*. The organisation is core funded by *Foras na Gaeilge*.

An Irish-medium school is one that teaches all subjects through Irish at primary level (*a gaelscoil*) and post-primary level (*a gaelcholáiste*).

The pupil's development is provided for by a broad and comprehensive curriculum and the standard curriculum as set by the Department of Education & Skills is followed. Irish is the teaching language in the school and the language of communication between the teachers, the pupils, the parents and the board of management. The principal aim of Irish-medium schools is to provide excellence in education and the ethos of Irish-medium schools helps to keep Irish as a living language in the community. Irish and international research has shown that bilingualism and immersion education have numerous benefits, including linguistic, educational and social advantages.

<http://www.gaelscoileanna.ie/en/about/> Accessed 21/8/14

Scotland

You'll find Gaelic-medium education in 63 primary schools (2008/09 session), including the Glasgow and Inverness Gaelic Schools. There's also more and more education in Gaelic at pre-school, in secondary schools and in further education.

[...]

Gaelic-medium education, like all education provision in Scotland, is determined by demand for the service balanced with the educational and economic viability of each educational unit.

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 created a statutory body, *Bòrd na Gàidhlig*, with the functions of promoting the use and understanding of the Gaelic language, Gaelic culture and Gaelic education.

Storlann Naiseanta na Gàidhlig is a government funded group that provides books, resources, support and curriculum advice for Gaelic pupils and teachers. They have a new [website](#) which aims to provide a taste of gaelic for parents of children in Gaelic medium education or those interested in Gaelic speaking schools.

[Comann nam Parant](#) is a parental network that can put you in touch with other Gaelic speaking parents in different regions across Scotland.

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Parentzone/yourchildatschool/choosingaschool/gaelicmediumeducation/index.asp> Accessed 21/8/14

Wales

The Welsh-Medium Educational Strategy is a historic milestone in Welsh-medium education and sets the Welsh Government's national strategic direction. It also sets the direction for making improvements in the teaching and learning of Welsh as a language, including, in particular, Welsh second language. In 2007 the Welsh Government committed to 'creating a national Welsh-medium Education Strategy to develop effective provision from nursery through to further and higher education, backed up by an implementation programme'. In response to this commitment the Welsh-medium Education Strategy was launched in April 2010.

[...]

The Welsh Government recognises the importance of providing children and young people with a wide range of social opportunities to use their Welsh so that they associate the language not only with the classroom, but also with leisure and cultural activities and, above all, with pleasure and entertainment.

These activities need to be provided both within educational environments as well as in the wider community.

Raising awareness of the value of Welsh among children and young people will also be a key consideration in our work to develop a marketing strategy for the language, and our work on increasing the use of Welsh in the field of technology and digital media.

Standards, under the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011, will also be important in this area with regard to services provided to children and young people.

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/welshlanguage/policy> Accessed 21/8/14

One of the most interesting features of Celtic-language schools is that they have created pockets of Celtic-speaking young people in otherwise predominantly or entirely English-speaking areas. The reasons for parents choosing a Celtic-language school in an English-speaking area – particularly when the parents themselves may have limited or even no knowledge of the Celtic language – are complicated, but raise issues of the (perceived) quality of education, social class, and politico-linguistic ideology and aspirations that cannot be discussed here. Certainly the Celtic-language medium schools – in some respects rather like English faith schools – often achieve significantly better academic results (in terms of the standard measures) than neighbouring English-language schools. More importantly, however, as MacKinnon [5] has remarked in the Scottish context: “every family with a Gaelic speaker is a potential mini-Gaidhealtachd [the Gaelic word for the Gaelic-speaking areas]”; and similarly argues for “taking ‘heartland’ and ‘urban Gaidhealtachd’ into 21st Century realities”. The old distinctions – still sometimes rather romantically viewed – of mother-tongue Celtic-speaking areas versus the rest have changed enormously in the last few decades. In Ireland, in particular, there is sometimes heated debate about the historical supremacy of the Gaeltacht and its native speakers regarding Irish-language authenticity.

Modern Media

By ‘modern media’ I do not simply mean modern ICT and the Internet. The insular Celtic languages have ancient literary traditions, but also a respectable book publishing history, from the first Bible translations to the language revivals in the 19th century and then onwards into the 20th century. But as far as print is concerned, there was a further minor – but very significant – revolution in the 1970s with the availability of cheap photocopiers and the rise – in Wales particularly – of community newspapers. These, with comparatively small circulation, helped strengthen Celtic identity in those areas where the languages were still spoken in significant proportions, but not served by traditional newsprint.

However, broadcasting, and perhaps even more importantly the digital media, have been some of the most positive influences on Celtic cultures and the preservation of the languages. (For some of the history of radio and television broadcasting in Wales and Scotland see [4, 5].)

Most important of all is the influence of modern ICT, digital media and the Web. Ken MacKinnon [5] quotes the distinguished linguist David Crystal that “an endangered language will progress if its speakers can make use of electronic technology” [6]. For all endangered or minority languages, access to web pages, native Wikipedia versions, and social media can be extraordinarily empowering – and in many cases, might represent the last hope for such tongues. (For further discussion of the Welsh and Scottish situations, see again [4, 5].) Now, this may be yet another example of technological optimism, so prevalent in Web and social media communities, but in the case of minority languages – at least for populations with access to the appropriate network infrastructure – I do believe it has more truth than in

many other cases. One way in which such applications are particularly appropriate is in supporting novices or less confident users – either by computer forums, or even automatic translation (however inadequate the latter may be). The recent convergence of television, the internet and other mobile apps can only improve this aspect – again, providing users have a sufficient network infrastructure. As the BBC director for Wales, Rhodri Talfan Davies, was recently reported in The Guardian newspaper [7]:

“Just as lives in Wales are becoming more messy, media services are more rigid and uniform”: they are either English language or Welsh, and he argued that they provide too few access points for people who speak a bit of Welsh. Before S4C began in 1982 one would “stumble across Welsh” on BBC1 or HTV Wales; arguably the language had a higher profile than now.

Maybe there is something to be said, therefore, if we wish to preserve, enhance and encourage minority languages, for fighting against separation or even ghettoization, and looking more towards plurality, where it still exists. One interesting feature of the use of the Internet by Celtic speakers is the significant number of participants outside the home nations. It does appear that digital technologies have helped create a sense of unity within the Celtic diaspora, something only possible with the globalisation of such technologies.

Historical Idealism

It is worth mentioning at this point the pan-Celtic movement and the Celtic League. According to its website <http://www.celticleague.net/>

The League was founded in 1961 by Celtic nationalists who saw the need for an inter Celtic organisation with a political dimension in order to make the peoples of the Celtic nations more aware of their commonality in terms of their language, history and culture, to further the Celtic nations’ right to independence and to promote the benefits of inter Celtic co-operation.

We have branches in the six Celtic countries of *Alba* (Scotland), *Breizh* (Brittany), *Cymru* (Wales), *Éire* (Ireland), *Kernow* (Cornwall), *Mannin* (Isle of Man), territorial branches in England, the USA and in Patagonia [where some Welsh is still spoken by descendants of settlers] and an international branch.

Aims of the League include:

- Fostering co-operation between Celtic peoples.
- Developing the consciousness of the special relationship and solidarity between them.
- Making our national struggles and achievements better known abroad.

- Campaigning for a formal association of Celtic nations to take place once two or more of them have achieved self-government.
- Advocating the use of the national resources of each of the Celtic countries for the benefit of all its people.

Such internationalisation and idealism is in many ways praiseworthy, particularly in the age of globalisation, yet the more ambitious aims of the organisation seem unlikely to be achieved.

Devolution

Devolution of limited powers to the Celtic areas of the UK has a complex history. Briefly, the Scottish Parliament was elected in 1999 after a successful referendum in 1979. A Welsh Assembly, supported by a much narrower majority than in Scotland, was also set up, but with more limited powers, as indicated by its name. Northern Ireland had possessed its own Parliament after the division of Ireland in the 1920s, but this was later suspended owing to the civil unrest and violence known as the “troubles”. After various unsuccessful attempts at devolution the current Northern Ireland Assembly was established only after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. It is an indication of sensibilities in Northern Ireland that, whereas there are “Members of the Scottish Parliament” and “Members of the Welsh Assembly”, there are only Northern Irish “Members of the Local Assembly”.

Devolution in these three regions / nations has had various consequences for the Celtic languages and language planning. Wales has gone furthest, with all public bodies being required to offer bilingual services, including communication with the public by letter, telephone, e-mail and websites. An increasing number of private institutions adopt a similar approach, even when not required to by law. Bilingual signage is now virtually universal. Welsh medium schools, although they started well before devolution, have also received a boost.

As might be expected, Scotland has not gone so far in the case of Gaelic, but various bodies to further the development of the language have been established, and again there are policies for the use of the language, including a limited number of Gaelic medium schools.

The place of Irish in Northern Ireland is even more complex, as the language is associated with Catholicism and Republicanism. Nevertheless there are attempts to (re)introduce it to some extent, particularly in a modest number of Irish medium schools, in which the problems of running such schools can be partly offset by at least some legal rights – if not universal political support – in the devolved regime [8]. For a somewhat polemical view of the rise of Irish language schools in general in Ireland see [9].

Breton

Before concluding, something at least should be said about the status and prospects of Breton. The French state is still considerably more centrist than the British, and there is nothing in France to approach recent devolutionary trends in the UK. Minority languages in France (not only Breton, but also Flemish, Alsatian, Basque, Corsican and other non-French Romance languages) receive little official support. On Breton in particular, Jean Le Dû, in a chapter much more wide ranging than its title would suggest, writes:

The public image of Brittany at the turn of the millennium is very strong, not only in France, but also elsewhere in Europe. [...] As a result, twinning agreements have been established between towns like Galway and Lorient, or even villages like An Spidéal (Spiddal) and Plougoustant (Plougrescant). School exchanges between both countries are not uncommon, but the languages used between pen pals are neither Breton nor Gaelic, but English and – to a lesser extent – French. Whereas, for instance, many Spiddal children have a good command of Irish, their Plougrescant partners do not have any Breton, since the transmission of the language halted abruptly, and silently, in the aftermath of the Second World War [10].

Le Dû does not hold out great hope for Breton, which has a problematic history regarding language standardisation and the place of dialects – indeed, even the orthography was not standardised until the 1950s, and then only partially. Le Dû concludes that a sound future for the Breton language could only be achieved “if the Bretons and their elected representatives engaged in a policy akin to that being pursued in Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia. Do I need to say that I have my doubts?”.

Conclusion

Many aspects of globalisation are extremely deleterious for minority ethnic languages, particularly where they have to compete with major world languages such as English, Russian, Chinese and Spanish. But where local political independence – even if only partial – can be combined with the resources to use modern digital techniques in broadcasting, web access and social networking, it could be the saving of a number of languages currently thought to be on the verge of extinction.

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