A course on
Language and History in the British Isles

Wayne Harbert
Cornell University
Why Language and History?
Language has a Role—often ignored-- in Shaping History
an insurgency is spreading beyond Afghanistan’s areas, absorbing former President Karzai.
And History Shapes the Fortunes of Languages
The way languages interact with or fail to interact with each other in a given region plays a role not only in how they change shape over time, but even in whether they survive.
Why the British Isles?

Part of the answer is autobiographical
I am basically a Germanic linguist

Who has taught courses on

Gothic
Old High German
Intro to Germanic Linguistics

Structure of Old English
Topics in the History of English
History of English to 1300
History of English since 1300
In the meantime, I have added

Ling 2238  Intro to Welsh

Ling 6649  Middle Welsh

Ling 2236  Intro to Scottish Gaelic

Ling 3308  Readings in Celtic languages (Welsh and Gaelic continuing conversation groups)
My last Gaelic class
My flirtation with Celtic languages led to...


An edited volume on “Language and Poverty”

A course on “Minority Languages and Linguistics,”
On the English side,

in my history of English classes over the past several decades I became increasingly uncomfortable with the parochial and lopsided narrative dictated by the way in which the subject is framed--as the history of the arrival, ascent, ascendancy and hegemony of English and the retreat and decline of its neighbors.
On the Celtic side,

Does teaching Celtic languages in North America make any difference in terms of helping to determine the fortunes of those languages?

What is it that we as Celtic language teachers in the outland can really do for the good of the languages that have attracted our devotion?
Is it our role to help by...

- producing consumers of the products of Celtic economies (books, films instructional materials, etc.)?

-- educating engaged advocates who understand the value, richness, and imperilment of these languages?
If the latter, is teaching students the languages themselves always the most efficient way of accomplishing the objective?

What about the many students who are (or could be) interested in knowing about the Celtic languages, but do not have the time, interest or aptitude to deal with the linguistic complexities involved in the arduous task of learning one?
A course which offers a more balanced view of the linguistic ecology of the British Isles over time featuring English side by side with the Celtic languages and others just as fellow inhabitants of the linguistic ecosystem, and examining each for what it can tell us about the nature and consequences of linguistic interaction, but avoiding the privileging of any one on the basis of external criteria.

Wouldn’t that be more interesting?
The British Isles are an ideal laboratory for exploring linguistic interactions.

They have constituted a veritable linguistic zoo over a time-scale of millennia, in which virtually every possible type of interaction has been instantiated, sometimes multiply, under slightly different starting conditions in individual cases, allowing for the consideration of the effects of sociological variables.
Not to mention that

The languages spoken there are

Familiar to American students, and yet

Highly exotic in their own ways.
And that the interactions continue to be of consequence.

Unlike some other Western European countries, the history of those interactions and competitions in the British Isles hasn’t yet quite culminated in the elimination of all of the ancient competitors but one.

Hegemony is incomplete, and questions of linguistic coexistence, rights, accommodation... are still live ones.
And the languages spoken in the British Isles include some that are remarkable among the world’s languages

1. The most widely used language in the world, and the only serious contender for the title ‘World Language,’ as well as others that are on their last legs, fading away in interestingly different ways.

2. A language which is both ‘the first official language’ of a Western industrial nation and at the same time an endangered language.
3. A language which has been spoken in one region of the Isles for at least 2500 years, and which became an ‘official language’ only three years ago.
4. Two of the tiny handful of languages which have successfully been brought back from the dead, and reestablished as spoken languages after their last native speakers died.
Even English...

which is of course an everyday language for us and a large part of the world,

turns out, if recent claims are correct, to be the product of a highly unusual series of events which make it a striking typological outlier in its genetic family.
The British Isles also offer continuous and unusually rich documentation of these linguistic histories and interactions.

Literacy came early, and to a number of different languages.

How letters spread through the Isles is also a very interesting matter.
Why now?

Besides these exotica, there are numerous genuine mysteries about the histories of these languages—things that linguists don’t yet understand or agree on,

and about which new hypotheses have emerged, and old ones have been revived, in the last decade.
promoted to some degree by the development of

• new scientific methodologies (e.g., methods of tracing of genetic markers in populations, new applications of computational methods)

• new theories of language contact and spread
So there has been a recent rather startling explosion of paradigm-challenging publications which have called into question almost every part of the received wisdom.
Giving new vigor to old debates about such questions as

Who was there before the Celts?
Non-Indo-European Picts?

Forsyth 1997
Phoenicians…

who left typological footprints in the shape of the Insular Celtic Languages?

Gensler (1993), Koch (2010),

vs. Isaac (2007).
And reopening settled questions, such as where the Celtic languages came from.

From the East, as has traditionally been assumed?

Or from the Atlantic by sea?

Cunliffe and Koch (2010).
And whether the notion ‘Celt’ is anything more than a modern invention, imposed in a procrustean fashion to the past.

Celtoscepticism  (James 1999, Karl 2010):
Was there a Celtic invasion? An Anglo-Saxon invasion?

When languages move from one place to another, is it because populations move? Or can languages move by themselves?

And what can the emergent science/art of genetic archaeology tell us about prehistoric changes in populations?
What language did the inhabitants of the British Lowland Zone speak when the Romans arrived?

British Celtic (Coates 2007)

Irish! (Schrijver 2009)

English! (well, Saxon, at least) (Oppenheimer 2007)
What language did the inhabitants of the British Lowland Zone speak when ‘English’ arrived?

British Celtic (Coates 2007)

Nothing—they had been wiped out by plague (Keys, David, 1999, and, following him, Ostler 2010)

British Latin (Schrijver 2001, 2007)

English! (well, Saxon, at least) (Oppenheimer 2007)
And to what degree have British languages been transformed encounters with others?

Insular Celtic as Afro-Asiaticized Celtic?

English as Celticized Germanic (Lutz, McWhorter, Filppula and others)

Modern English as Danish 2SL English (Thomason and Kauffman, McWhorter and others)
New methods and new controversies

What can and can’t we learn from the distribution of genetic markers?

What can and can’t computational methods developed for other areas, such as biological cladistics, tell us about

• time depth of linguistic separation

• whether undeciphered graphic symbol systems are writing or not.
The people applying these methods to these problems are typically not linguists, and it shows.
And the popular science press eagerly offers up deferential, breathless, reckless, simplistic, uncritical reports of pronouncements about language by such ‘real’ scientists.

On Stephen Oppenheimer’s popular book *The Origins of the British*

“Geneticists have recently plunged into the field, arguing that linguists have been too pessimistic and that advanced statistical methods developed for dating genes can also be applied to languages.”
And the ‘cracking’ of the Pictish symbol code by computer scientists, elicits headlines like:


Linguist Makes Sensational Claim: English Is a Scandinavian Language

ScienceDaily (Nov. 27, 2012)
From such (pre)-historical controversies we proceed to modern sociopolitical questions

• the economic, attitudinal, demographic, and political factors that are shaping the trajectories of languages in the British Isles in the 21st century, and what, if anything, can (or should) be done to alter those trajectories.

• Language rights as human rights in a changing British/European political context.

• the rationale/legitimacy of distinguishing between ‘immigrant’ and ‘traditional’ languages
The Syllabus
Week 1: The first wave: pre-Celtic languages of the British Isles?

Week 2: The second wave: the Celtic languages arrive in Britain

An interlude on Celtoscepticism

Week 3: The Third Wave: The Roman conquest of Britain and its linguistic effects

Why didn't the Britons end up speaking a Romance language? Or did they?
**Week 4-5:** The fourth wave: Angles, Saxons, and Gaels

**Week 6:** The rise of British letters, literatures and literacies: Pictish?, Latin, Welsh, Irish, English

Special topic: were the Pictish symbols writing?

**Week 7:** An Interlude: promise and limits of genetic archaeology.
Week 8: Linguistic interactions in Britain: negotiating the boundaries.

Special topic: Romani

Week 9: The Celtic Hypothesis: Is English Celticized West Germanic?
Week 10-11: The Fifth Wave: Danish and Norman French

Is Modern English the descendant of a Danish-English contact language?

How did the effects of Scandinavian contact differ in England, Scotland and Ireland, and why?

Special topic: Channel Islands French
Week 12: The Decline, Revival and Revitalization of the Celtic languages

How has the political status of minority languages in the British Isles changed, as a reflection of political ideology?

Special topic: Cornish

Week 13: Language and Dialect in Britain

Special topic: Scots

Week 14: The British linguistic landscape in the 21st century. Colonial legacies
The course offered, on the one hand, a less distorted, more nuanced, fairer and more dimensional picture of British linguistic history --even of the history of English, which is, more than any other language of the area, a product of linguistic symbiosis.
And, on the other hand,

the course equipped students with a relatively comprehensive and systematic appreciation of the historical and current significance, imperilment, and prospects of minority languages in Britain, including the Celtic languages.
To single out just one language,

At the end, students from a variety of disciplines could talk knowledgeably about
• cynghanedd
• The linguistic provisions of the Acts of Union
• The Welsh Bible
• Griffith Jones
• the linguistic effects of the Industrial Revolution in Wales.
• The Blue Books
• The Education Act of 1872
• ”Welsh Not”
• Saunders Lewis
• S4C
As well as a variety of conceptual matters

• the substrate/superstrate distinction

• Diglossia and bilingualism

• Abstand and Ausbau minority languages

• Codeswitching
For their final project,

they were allowed to pick any theme in the scope of the course. A few wrote on English.

Most, though, gravitated toward the underdogs.
A student of landscape architecture wrote a study of the death and revival of Cornish.

A student of engineering wrote about Shelta.

A student of systems engineering wrote a study of the decline and revival of Manx.

A student of economics wrote about the economic factors affecting Welsh language maintenance.

A student of linguistics wrote about Shetlands Scots.
CDs of all my course materials are available