
Dialects, Speech Communities, and Applied Linguistics: A Realistic Approach to the Teaching of Irish in Non-Irish Speaking Areas

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An instructor, when asked to teach a modern language in a college or university, usually sets about teaching a standard variety of the language, that is, a variety of the language which is considered the dominant variety of a language which is not widely spoken, or else an important regional variety of a language which is spoken over a broad geographical area. Such varieties are usually closely tied to a written standard language, so that the vocabulary, grammatical system, and even the sound system of the spoken language are often reflected very directly in the written form of the language. The average speaker of the language may in fact play down any obvious differences between the spoken language and the written language, ascribing such differences to imperfect acquisition of the language. The codified, often idealized, written variety may thus come to be seen as "correct", "proper", or "educated" speech, while the spoken variety may be seen as "grammatically incorrect", "slovenly", "unpleasant" in its sounds, and characteristic of uneducated people. There may in fact be strong pressures on the instructor to adhere closely to the written standard, however idealized it may be, and however removed it may be from the speech of living people.

The problem is especially acute, perhaps, in the teaching of Modern Arabic. Here, very clearly, the instructor must carefully consider the needs of the students.
of contemporary culture in the Arab world cannot ignore the Holy Koran and the language in which it was written, Classical Arabic, a language which is anything but a "dead" language in the life of the Arab world. On the other hand, the student of current affairs will have to familiarize himself or herself with "Cairo newspaper standard" Arabic. If, furthermore, the student wishes to travel and live in a specific Arabic-speaking nation, that student must carefully select a regional dialect of spoken Arabic which may differ sharply from any form of written Arabic and from spoken dialects of all other regions.

To reduce the problem to its simplest dimensions, in teaching students the written, codified form of a language, we introduce them essentially to a body of written literature, representing the world of the past or the present. In teaching students spoken dialects, we introduce them to living, "organic" speech communities, where the linguistic heterogeneity and the rates of linguistic change within the different speech communities can be bewildering to the stranger. In selecting a written standard variety of a language, we may have little choice; we must teach the accepted written standard variety of the region. In selecting a spoken variety of the language, we have far more latitude, though here again we must emphasize the needs of the learner. In the case of British English, it might seem obvious that we must teach the dialect of educated people of the Greater London Metropolitan Area in its accepted phonological form, the "Received Pronunciation". After all, this speech variety, taught in the British public schools and popularized in recent decades by the British Broadcasting Corporation, reflects the speech of a dominant social group in a dominant geographical region in Britain, and as such carries great social prestige. Surely, then, the choice is simple; a newly arrived family from Pakistan coming to settle in with relatives in a factory district of London will be taught "BBC English" and not "Cockney" English. Similarly, a family from Hong Kong newly arrived in Aberdeen, Scotland, will be taught "BBC English" and not the Aberdonian dialect. Right? Perhaps not. Even in what might appear from a distance to be the most clear-cut situations, the teacher who is sensitive to the needs of his or her students will temper the instruction to those needs; the social and geographical linguistic variation of the world immediately outside the classroom will be introduced into the curriculum as needed to help the learner "settle into" the surrounding speech community. Even in regard to the French language, the bastion of linguistic correctness, instruction in "street French" is now considered necessary for the serious learner of the French.

These, then, are some of the considerations we must bear in mind as we select materials and design classroom activities for the conventional teaching of Celtic languages in ordinary classroom situations for normal academic purposes. If we concern ourselves seriously with helping our students to acquire near-native fluency and accuracy in a Celtic language as rapidly as possible, however, we will have to exercise considerable ingenuity. If we take on the further responsibility of helping to provide a speech community outside the classroom in which our students can actually employ the language so arduously acquired, we will be taxing ourselves to the limit, but this is in fact the problem facing the teacher of Celtic languages. Unless teachers help to provide a context for the use of these languages, instruction in the Celtic languages may well be a futile exercise and a waste of the teacher's time. We will return to this issue later.

Turning now to the immediate problems of classroom instruction, we find that the standard, written Celtic languages offer no great problems in terms of conventional classroom instruction. Celtic languages are sharply different in linguistic form from the major languages of western Europe, but the industrious student may expect to read written materials in the standard language with no great difficulty eventually. Even literature written in a non-
standard dialect may present few difficulties, especially when up-to-date reference materials exist. But what of the spoken languages? Here we must deal with the effects of at least a millenium of history. Spoken languages imply the existence of speech communities, but speech communities in the Celtic areas of Europe are usually shattered or battered communities which have withstood the gale force winds of the expanding imperial languages English and French. It has been estimated that the number of speakers of Irish in the Irish-speaking areas of Ireland who now speak the Irish language regularly in their daily activities is as low as 25,000⁶. Yet, according to a recent newspaper account of Irish-language broadcasting, there are an estimated 40,000 speakers of Irish in the greater Boston metropolitan area here in the United States⁷. Similarly, there are thousands of native speakers of Irish clustered in the greater London metropolitan area in Britain, many of whom speak Irish regularly to family and friends, a situation well described by the late Irish writer Dónall Mac Amhlaigh⁸. These speech communities, whether at home in their native areas or abroad in emigrant communities, represent the kinds of marginalized, "dislocated" speech communities so often described by Prof. Joshua Fishman⁹.

If we prepare students to use spoken varieties of Celtic languages in speech communities outside the classroom, toward which speech communities do we direct our efforts? Even before instruction in a spoken variety of a language begins, the student would have to have a clear idea of the speech community, or cluster of communities, in which he or she would like to find himself/herself. Many students, nevertheless, haven't the faintest idea of which community they would like to visit. They do know, however, that they will never find themselves in the unnerving situation of having to find food and shelter at night in an area where no one speaks English (or French). On the contrary, they may find it difficult to pry loose a few words in the Celtic language in question from a local speaker of the language, a situation so painfully described in Máirtín Ó Cadhain's "Aisling agus Aisling Eile". Teaching "survival Irish", "survival Gaidhlig", "survival Welsh", or "survival Breton" (to say nothing of "survival Manx" or "survival Cornish") could be a bizarrely unreal activity, though the students might not suspect it initially. Similarly, some of the problem situations described in Di Pietro (1987) might be hopelessly out of place -- at least in the first encounters of struggling language learners with native speakers. Similar problems exist with all communicative approaches to teaching Celtic languages. Unlike the student of Arabic lost in the Rif Mountains of Morocco attempting desperately to make himself or herself understood in local Arabic (or Berber?) before nightfall, a student of a Celtic language in a Celtic area would very likely find himself or herself in the opposite situation; that is, after an initial attempt to communicate in the local language, the local inhabitant addressed might reply in the local dialect of the language, in the standard variety of the language, or in English (or French), depending on his or her assessment of the student's proficiency in the local dialect. The student would count himself or herself lucky indeed if the local person continued the conversation in a relaxed manner in the local dialect of the language. For example, since I spoke Connemara Irish before beginning my research on Aran Irish, I was always responded to in Aran Irish, but I remember approaching a man I knew on one of the islands who was engaged in a friendly conversation with a neighbor in a very public situation in front of a shop. I approached the man, hoping to join in the conversation. Instead, the conversation stopped abruptly, and my conversational openers were responded to politely but laconically. Sensing that I was not to be included in the conversation, I politely "buttered out" of the conversation, and the conversation continued its course in my absence. This situation would not be an unusual one for a stranger in an Irish-speaking area. The point is that, as teachers of Celtic languages, we
might have to prepare our students for a linguistic etiquette quite different from that normally envisioned in communicative syllabi.

Keeping these considerations in mind as we turn more specifically to the problems of teaching Irish in non-Irish speaking areas, what can we do in the classroom to foster both the learning and the acquisition of Irish, and how can we prioritize the tasks? First, Standard Irish should be taught in its written form, and students should be at least familiar with the recommended pronunciation for the standard orthography (an Láirgneáil)7. I suppose it is possible to imagine situations in which one might not teach the standard written form of Irish, but it would be difficult for a teacher to justify not equipping students to read road signs, directions, and simple literature written in Standard Irish. Another important reason for teaching Standard Irish is that it is the source of a flood of neologisms coming into the living, rural dialects via the educational system and the Irish-language broadcasting service for the Irish-speaking (and, non-Irish speaking) areas, Raidió na Gaeltachta. One cannot talk about the modern world without these new terms, and people in the Irish-speaking areas take a lively interest in the outside world. As I have mentioned elsewhere8, they are proud of being able to discuss world affairs in Irish if they so choose. To them, Irish is one of a number of small but important modern languages in the new Europe, along with languages such as Norwegian, Danish, or Czech, not a cluster of neglected, antiquated and dying dialects spoken in an impoverished rural backwater. Raidió na Gaeltachta has also helped to increase mutual intelligibility among speakers of different dialects, to the point where the youngest of listeners may no longer be able to identify the origin of many dialectally marked expressions9, and this also should contribute to the unconscious use of Standard Irish terms in the different dialect areas. In sum, I think it entirely appropriate for the speech of learners of Irish to reflect this "new growth" in the living language, even when conversing with speakers of Irish in the most traditional Irish-speaking areas.

So much for the standard language -- what of the non-standard dialects? First, it would be an unusual class in which all, or even most, of the students were strongly inclined toward learning a given dialect. In most cases, the class as a whole is largely neutral in terms of the dialect to be selected. In such cases, the non-standard dialect in which the teacher is most comfortable might be a good choice. Provided that the teacher makes a consistent attempt to link non-standard forms with equivalent standard forms, any increases in the complexity of the material to be learned might be offset by gains in the "naturalness" and "authenticity" of the vocal "input" coming from the teacher. The oral input of the teacher can also be supplemented in due course by the rich literature, oral and written, of the dialect area in question in printed form and on video and audio cassettes. Such material might include folklore, folk song, modern creative writing, autobiography, and descriptions of traditional life.

In those cases where the teacher has acquired only, or mainly, "school Irish", the teacher can simply use Standard Irish alone. In any case, the classroom is the primary acquisition context for the target language, and the teacher is the sole "live" source of input and interaction for natural speech in that language. Artificial though it may be, the classroom is the first Irish "speech community" that the learner usually experiences.

What of the world outside of the classroom? How does the learner relate to the world of "real" speech communities, particularly to speech communities composed of native speakers of living dialects, whether mixed communities of dialect speakers in large urban areas or small, dialectally homogeneous rural communities? In the case of those language classrooms outside of Ireland which are far from any communities of Irish speakers, the
classroom can be extended into the student's living situation in both space and time. This is especially important because students of the spoken language tend to assume the existence of an idealized speech community in which somewhere, sometime, they will exercise their newly acquired language.

Provision can be made for "language houses" on campus where students can "live" the language they are acquiring in the classroom; summer "language camps", where students can practice the language in a pleasant rural environment which reflects the natural world in which all languages are born; and at the very least, "language nights", where at least a handful of people can come together to "process" their world through their acquired language and enjoy each other's company over the years. My own experience has shown that four or five people is an ideal number for such a conversational group. If the group contains six or more people, there is a natural tendency for the group to split into two separate conversational subgroups, each pursuing a separate topic. If only two or three people are present, the burden of carrying on the conversation in a newly acquired language may be too heavy for the participants. The role of the teacher, native speaker, or near-native speaker in such a group would be to help maintain a healthy conversational flow. Stable conversational groups can exist over decades, and, according to my observation, can produce steady acquisition of both active and passive language skills. In such artificial environments, of course, there can be no question of selecting a dialect. The dialects of the most fluent speakers will tend to predominate, and the predominant dialects on any particular occasion will reflect the composition of the group on that particular night. Mutual intelligibility in the group is not seriously diminished by dialectal diversity, provided that the rate of speech of the most fluent speakers is not too rapid, and provided, of course, that individual speakers are willing to backtrack and to paraphrase words and expressions not understood. I myself once offered to try to use Standard Irish in the conversational group to which I belong in place of the heavy Aran dialect I now speak. To my surprise, even the less fluent members of the group asked me to continue speaking in unmixed dialect. They said that they much preferred natural speech with its occasional risks of unintelligibility to a clearer but more stilted or artificial speech variety.

Returning to the conventional classroom situation, which dialect should be selected when the classroom is located near a sizable community of native speakers outside of Ireland? Such communities are typically dialectally mixed concentrations of emigrants in a large urban area in an English-speaking host country. In such cases, it seems reasonable that instruction be given in the dominant dialect of the local Irish community, and that close ties should be maintained with that community. Intermediate and advanced learners of Irish can be exposed formally to contrastive presentations of the phonological, grammatical and lexical systems of other dialects, and informally to the spoken Irish of a wide range of speakers from different dialect areas at events co-hosted with the local Irish-speaking community. One goal of instruction might be the eventual absorption of language learners into the local community as functioning members of the community.

In Ireland itself, the selection of a dialect for the classroom might be determined largely by geographical considerations. With the exception of Dublin, the nation's capital and the home of a large population from all areas of Ireland, it might be wise to view Ireland as divided into three east-west belts, each characterized by the dialect spoken in the westemmost areas of the belt. Moving southward on a north-south axis, one would find three broad belts where the Ulster, the Connacht, and the Munster dialects respectively would each be nurtured and given pride of
CONCLUSION

A language implies a speech community, a community which may be as small as a group of friends meeting together over the years or as large as the entire Irish-speaking diaspora. Instruction in a language implies intelligent nurturing of the language acquisition process in learners, to the extent of even helping to create speech communities for the learner. The two principal contexts of language acquisition historically have been the household and the children's playgroup. Prof. Fishman has stressed the vital importance of "home-family-neighborhood-community" in the "intergenerational mother tongue transmission" process. Teachers of Celtic languages as living languages must be committed to assisting in that process, both out of respect for the communities of people who speak Celtic languages and out of respect for their own students, who hope to have the opportunity of visiting such communities one day.

The language classroom cannot be a family, nor can it really be a playgroup, but the language teacher, like all good teachers, can be a catalyst for beneficial change in a community -- in this case, a speech community, however small. After all, the language classroom, if it is what it purports to be, is a threshold, a place of arduous initiation, across which the candidates, once properly prepared, step into a timeless world of literature (in the case of the classical languages), into a living human community (in the case of the modern languages), or into a blend of both (in the case of modern literature and the performing arts). The role of dialects in such a community of learners is to provide authenticity and historical continuity for the learner, on the one hand, and a place of honor and a valued function for the native speaker, on the other hand. Above all, Standard Irish must be seen as complementing and
completing the regional dialects in Ireland and abroad, not as competing with them or replacing them.

Notes

1. In speaking of "dominant" linguistic varieties or "dominant" dialects, we are speaking of the characteristic speech forms of those social or geographical groups of people who are distinguished from neighboring social groups by concentrations of wealth, power, and prestige. Neighboring groups with different speech norms may orient themselves linguistically in the direction of the dominant social group or speech community. This may begin the "snowball process" characteristic of the growth of standard languages.


3. The article was published a couple of years ago, in reference to a projected hour-long weekly digest of events from Raidió na Gaeltachta to be broadcast on a radio station in Boston, with Seán Bán Breathnach as host. The projected listenership was an estimated 40,000 Irish-speakers.

4. See Mac Amhlaigh (1960). A claim for some 100,000 people in London able to speak a Celtic language is reported in the weekly newspaper Ancis, 3 December, 1989. The London Association for Celtic Education is cited as the source of the figure.


7. Standard Irish is normally considered to be the written form of the language as outlined in the official handbook Gramadach na Gaeilge agus Litrí na Gaeilge: An Cairedeán Oifigiúil, published in 1958, and as supplemented -- and revised -- by the Foclóir Gaeilge-Bhéarla, published in 1977 (cf. Ó Donnall, 1977). The Láráchanúint (cf. Ó Baoil, 1986), on the other hand, is regarded as an effort to provide a spoken standard form of the language, one which follows closely the form of the written standard as set out in the Foclóir Póca (cf. Roinn Óideachais, 1986) but one which is ultimately based on the reference works for the standard written language cited above. Some might regard the Láráchanúint simply as the written standard Irish of the Caighdeán Oifigiúil and of the Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla "wired for sound". In fact, this whole matter is a good deal more complicated (cf., for example, Nic Mhaoláin, 1985, or Ó Baoil, 1993).

First, there are a number of changes made in the Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla (henceforth, FGB) in regard to the form of written Irish laid out in the Caighdeán Oifigiúil (henceforth, CO). Unfortunately, these changes are not conveniently listed for the reader of FGB; he/she must happen upon them while consulting the dictionary entries. Therefore, the student of modern Irish cannot be confident of CO as the authoritative canon of modern Standard Irish, nor does he/she have easy access to the revised canon in FGB. Furthermore, a number of permitted changes are mentioned in the Láráchanúint, particularly in Chapter Nine, the chapter on verbal forms. The changes involve the use of the pronouns muid/sinn in a variety of linguistic contexts, the use of the pronoun siad in an analytic verbal construction in the third person plural of the past habitual tense, the use of the future relative marker -s (permitted, but not exemplified, in CO), and the phonetic shape of the second person singular inflectional ending /a:/ in the conditional tense (for -fás/-fás). The last-mentioned change would have to be admitted as a morphological revision of the written form in CO, not simply as a straightforward phonological realization of the written form; certainly an older generation of us familiar with Buntús Cainte tapes would notice the change!

True enough, constant and careful reference is made to CO and FGB, and the changes are described as "permitted" ("Tá rogha tugtha...", etc.), but nowhere are precise references made to the authorizations. Clearly, then, the reader must rely on the authority of the
Láranúint itself when using such forms; the Láranúint, therefore, becomes de facto part of the defining canon of modern Standard Irish, along with CQ and FGB.

Second, what of the status of other reference works compiled since the publication of CQ? What of the English-Irish Dictionary (henceforth EID) of Tomás de Bhaldraithe (cf. de Bhaldraithe, 1959), still the most modern and comprehensive English-Irish dictionary in existence? Though written in the "Standard Grammar and Spelling" (cf. de Bhaldraithe, 1959, p. vi), the reader will notice a number of differences between EID and FGB, e.g., An Laitve (EID)/An Laitvia (FGB); sóiveideach (EID)/sóiveadach (FGB); and maidhm talún (EID)/maidhm thalún (FGB). What of the Graiméar Gaeilge na mBráithre Créistí (cf. Christian Brothers, 1960), the unofficial but invaluable reference on modern Irish grammar and syntax for some 35 years? What of the new Úrchúrsa Gaeilge (cf. Ó Baoill & Ó Tuathail, 1992), which contains the new forms, "agus comhúdarás á thabhairt dóibh" (cf. Ó Baoill, 1993, p. 30). As a number of scholars have urged (e.g., Ó Baoill, 1993, and Ó Ruairc, 1993), it is time to issue a revised version of CQ, so that many pending questions can be resolved and the Irish-speaking public can have access to the revised canon. Meanwhile, Standard Irish, along with the traditional spoken dialects, continues to evolve.


10. The "middle belt" of Irish, including both Leinster and Connacht, may have had an historical precedent in a dialect which once stretched in a wide, curved swathe from the whole area of Connacht east through middle Leinster, dipping southward through southeast Leinster, a dialect which Nicholas Williams calls "Gaeilge Gháileonach" (cf. Williams, 1994). The existence of such an historical precedent, of course, in no way affects the practicality of the "triple-belt" proposal, but it does, perhaps, lend it a little "authenticity".


12. Here the teacher of threatened modern languages parts company with the teacher of classical languages and literatures, as well as with the teachers of languages that have or have had the force of an empire behind them.
REFERENCES


