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Language Maintenance and Language Death: The Case of the Irish Language

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Abstract

According to the Constitution of Ireland (2018), the Irish language is the Republic's national and first official language. In 2007 it was declared one of the official languages of the European Union, gaining a new status in comparison with the past when it was regarded as a Treaty language only. Since this adoption many changes have happened and many projects have been initiated in the field of maintenance and death prevention of the Irish language. The article analyses data gained from the qualitative research, the final part of which was carried out in the Republic of Ireland from February to March 2015 at the National University of Ireland in the city of Galway. The research sheds light on the future of the Irish language and reflects the opinions of informants on the topic of language death and language maintenance. Our aim was to obtain a most diverse sample of respondents with different attitudes towards the Irish language revitalization and its potential to be used as an effective tool within various spheres of life, ensuring the language's vitality and protection from possible death. We highlight some of the most salient preventive measures, which seem to work in the area of language maintenance, including a huge role of particular organizations aimed at the Irish language revitalization. Last but not least, we pay attention to concerns about the language, which must be identified in order to find out which areas should be primarily addressed so as to protect the language for future generations.

Keywords: *Irish language, language maintenance, language death, language revitalization, Gaeltacht*

Жизнь и смерть языка: языковая ситуация в Ирландии

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Согласно Конституции Ирландии (2018 г.) ирландский язык является национальным и первым официальным языком республики. В 2007 г. он был провозглашен одним из официальных языков Европейского Союза и, таким образом, получил новый статус, поскольку ранее был лишь языком, на котором публиковались и юридически заверялись договоры ЕС. С тех пор произошли многие изменения и были начаты многочисленные проекты, нацеленные на поддержание и предотвращение гибели ирландского языка. В статье представлены данные, полученные в результате качественного исследования, последний этап которого проходил в феврале—марте 2015 г. в Национальном университете Ирландии, г. Голуэй. Анализируется будущее ирландского языка и мнения информантов по вопросам, касающимся гибели и сохранения языка. Была сделана выборка респондентов с различным отношением к возрождению ирландского языка и его потенциальному использованию

в качестве эффективного инструмента в различных сферах жизни. Особое внимание уделено наиболее значимым мерам по поддержанию ирландского языка, включая огромную роль некоторых организаций в его возрождении, а также проблемам, которые необходимо поставить и в первую очередь решить, чтобы сохранить ирландский язык для будущих поколений.

Ключевые слова: ирландский язык, сохранение языка, смерть языка, возрождение языка, *Gaeltacht*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not only about communication — there is much more to it. Language carries content. Through language, we can manifest our identity. Language and culture are intrinsically linked together. It is not wise to teach language without culture and culture without at least some key facts about language. We are also aware of our place in a particular community thanks to the language we use. It allows us to define our borders and identify with our roots. We can use one or more languages as our mother tongue(s), without too much thinking about grammar and vocabulary.

Language gives us a feeling of togetherness, belonging to a larger group or community. Language in general is an important element of cultural and national identity expression and cultural distinctiveness in the context of the 21st century.

Identity is often expressed through regional, lesser-used or minority languages. Language makes us distinct in a way that differentiates the users of one language group from another (Bačová 1996; Wardhaugh 1993). This can happen on a daily basis, but is more visible during particular cultural, festive or sportive activities, which become special occasions for identity manifestation.

The purpose and goal of our qualitative research is to examine the interconnection between the Irish language and Irish identity, more precisely the challenges of the future for the Irish language. Specifically, we aim to draw a sample list of best practices which could help the Irish language to stay alive and help to maintain it in public and private life. In today's Ireland culture has an important place in shaping, expressing and cultivating identities (Wallace 2015). The Irish language can also thrive and restore its position hand in hand with culture. As it will be examined in our article, there are many third-level institutions in Ireland supporting this approach. Louis de Paor, head of the Irish Studies Centre at the National University of Ireland in the city of Galway, asserts that the study programs at the Centre and various other departments at NUIG have got Irish included as part of their agenda creating a bilingual workplace. In this way, the students of the Centre for Irish Studies encounter the Irish culture in a bilingual way, emphasizing a bilingual approach to Irish literature, culture and history (Wallace 2015). The National University in the city of Galway is one of the national universities known for its bilingual approach, creating added value in terms of the Irish language maintenance based on the fact that the place is very close to true Gaeltacht (Irish speaking regions). Galway itself has always performed as a bilingual city.

There is no doubt that the Irish language is a valuable part of the Irish culture, heritage and, in general, the world's linguistic diversity. Although it is an obligatory subject which students study for the period of 14 years only a small percentage of people, cca. 3%, consider it to be their mother tongue. The end of their Irish language study is finished with leaving certificate examination. One of the core subjects in examination is Irish.

Aproximately 1,66 million of Irish people (Ó Ceallaigh, Ní Dhonnabháin 2015) represent different groups of the Irish language speakers with various levels of its knowledge. This brings forth the question about the future of Irish. Will it survive for a period of 30 years? We assume that the government's support, hand in hand with the genuine interest of Irish people in their original language, could help to maintain and revitalize it.

Throughout the medium of analysed interviews and a theoretical database, we will try to highlight the importance of language in terms of distinctive identity. We will also identify specific challenges, barriers and positive factors influencing the whole process of the Irish language's vitality.

The research of language and identity raises new questions and opens up views on language revitalization. The comparison of different minority, lesser-used and regional languages could be helpful for determining their success or failure.

Our aim is to explore the issue of language maintenance and possibilities of language death prevention. Furthermore, we attempt to examine discourses connected with the use of the Irish language in Ireland. The article is written from the perspective of external/non-Irish researchers residing in Slovakia who carried out their research in the Republic of Ireland during a short-term stay at the National University of Ireland in the city of Galway. The analysed interviews provided us with an information database, which allows us to discern key factors helping or impeding the Irish language revitalization and maintenance. In the research we take into consideration the age diversity of the respondents' sample. We predominantly focus on the attitudes of people towards the Irish language use.

We investigate the potential of Irish to be used as an effective tool within various spheres of life, ensuring the language's vitality and protection from possible death. The data give us an opportunity to consider different opinions regarding the Irish language revitalization and maintenance. We highlight some of the most salient preventive measures, which seem to work in the area of language maintenance, including the huge role of particular organizations aimed at the Irish language revitalization. We pay attention to the activities of the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and the initiatives undertaken to revitalize Irish. Last but not least, we analyse the concerns about the language, which must be identified in order to find out which areas should be addressed most so as to protect the language for the future generations.

The article is dominated by the assumption (Fishman, 1991), that without inter-generational transmission, language maintenance and revitalization are deemed to fail. We aim to illustrate the examples and best practices, which serve as predictors of success in the Republic of Ireland taking into particular account the challenges and barriers, as well as a range of positive factors, which may support language rejuvenation and alleviate the process of language death.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Language revitalization is not an easy task to achieve without the minority language practice, i.e. its use in real life situations. The question of language revitalization stands on an uncertain terrain. Nowadays, there are many languages undergoing the process of revitalization or revival. One should be careful using the above-mentioned terms.

The former implies revitalization of any, still living, although a minority language, referring to the number of speakers, whereas the latter is typical of those languages whose native speakers died a long time ago. The primary example of the second case could be the Manx language, which is nowadays being revived on the Isle of Man, or Cornish in Cornwall, or many Aboriginal indigenous languages in Australia (Amery 2001). Some linguists suggest the term ‘dormant language/s’ (Edwards 2001), since it is possible to revive them even though there are not many native speakers left or even all of them are dead. There is a possibility that even a dead language can be revived.

According to the *Atlas of World's Languages in Danger* (2018), the Irish language could be characterized as definitely endangered, as there is a small number of households in Ireland where the language is transferred from parent to child. It means that the mother tongue in most of the Irish households would be English. There are, of course, a few exceptions to the rule if we take into account the true Gaeltacht areas and true Irish-language homes where communication of family members is carried out through the medium of Irish. The support of such households, in which the language is not merely of symbolical importance, plays a vital role in its revitalization. The general increase of Irish-language households and motivation to establish such households could prevent a drop of Irish language speakers and, to a certain extent, reverse the language shift (Fishman 1991).

According to EGIDS (Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale 2018), based on J. Fishman's GIDS (Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale), languages can be classified into distinct categories. Irish could be regarded as a threatened language. It is not easy to classify it given the fact that the Constitution of Ireland deems the Irish language as the first official and national language in the Republic of Ireland. It is used in face-to-face communication predominantly in Irish-speaking communities both in Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht parts of the country by the members of the Irish language networks. Although there is a multitude of initiatives aimed at the Irish language revitalization, based on the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010—2030, it seems that the population has a different opinion regarding the present-day function of the Irish language. The 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language is the initiative of the Irish government to foster the Irish language revitalization and support the increase of the Irish language users in the period of twenty years, starting in 2010, in the whole Republic of Ireland. Irish could be described as reawakening in its spirit if we take into account the increase of the Irish language schools in predominantly English environments.

According to EGIDS, there are other attributes which could be applied in the case of Irish. Here we have in mind the symbolical versus functional use of Irish. On the one hand, the Irish language could be regarded as salient in terms of the heritage, history, cultural identity construction and national identity preservation. In this case, we could view Irish as dormant, but there is still a significant number of people with more than symbolic knowledge of Irish found across all generations, including young people. In this case the language should not be viewed solely as a reminder of the past because there are still a number of people who use Irish as their mother tongue, so for them it is not only a token, but a real medium of communication.

According to the EGIDS division of languages into different categories mentioned above, we tend to position Irish in the area of threatened and shifting languages with a few exceptions to the rule. On the one hand, Irish could be deemed as threatened because it is losing its users; but, on the other hand, there has been a rapid increase of Irish secondary schools generating more Irish speakers. The truth, however, is that the Irish language is used in face-to-face communication predominantly in the Irish-speaking communities, institutions and the Gaeltacht areas. It means that the loss is huge but the gain is also significant if we consider the popularity of Irish thanks to the improved Irish language teaching and new opportunities for young people with the knowledge of Irish.

The shifting status of Irish is influenced by the fact that the child-bearing generation can use it to a certain extent due to having it as a compulsory subject in the curriculum for several years, but it is rarely transmitted to children yet. However, there is a positive tendency to enrol children in Irish language pre-schools called *naíonrú*, which are also gaining popularity.

Nothing can work better than good will and enthusiasm in society to revive their ancestral language(s). Such positive attitudes are a necessity, as they make any of such ambitious goals easier to achieve without forcing the language upon people through the medium of education or other language support programmes.

The Irish language, still spoken actively by the minority of the Irish people located in Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking regions), but not only, is also undergoing the revitalization process in the rest of Ireland (predominantly its English-speaking parts). In comparison to other dead languages which undergo the processes of revival, or resuscitation, or reinvigoration, the Irish language in the Republic of Ireland has still got a number of fluent native speakers. For these people, Irish is an important aspect of their personal identity — in a certain way even an emotional thing. The Irish language was described by many of our Gaeltacht respondents as their own language, the language of their ancestors and part of their heritage, an intrinsic part of their identity, culture and territory. Quoted below, are just a few representative opinions of the Moycullen residents:

- (1) *“My language is very important and still there are people in Ireland who do not feel comfortable in speaking English like people from the Islands and we should look after them”* (woman, 65).
- (2) *“My friend from Spiddal is true Irish speaker, we go from Irish to English and vice versa, we do not like new made up words. I still use Irish when I need it, when I meet native Irish speakers I automatically speak Irish to them and I speak also a lot of Irish when we go abroad”* (woman, 60).

Nowadays Irish is becoming fashionable. If before people had a negative view of it, the opinions have reversed. Public opinion displays great differences in terms of the people's own first national and official language revitalization. Although there is a substantial number of people who are worried about the future of the Irish language (Boxer 2002; Gibbons 1996; Millroy 1992), revitalization efforts can prove successful in the long-term perspective and become salutary for strengthening national and cultural identity. However, it can only happen if more and more people speak Irish on a daily basis and pass it on their children.

Bilingualism appears to be one of the ways to maintain the minority, regional and lesser-used languages or other so called ‘small languages’. The above-mentioned *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010—2030* aimed to achieve societal bilingualism in the period of two decades. Bilingualism seems a good option in order to reverse the enormous language shift towards the English language in the Irish-language households. However, as it was mentioned at the very beginning, the language revitalization needs a positive societal approach, i.e. language cannot be seen as a burden, once there is a decision to revitalize it. Achieving competence in an ancestral language should be viewed as beneficial for one’s identity. If an ancestral language does not play a functional role anymore and people see it only as a symbol, then its revitalization is doomed to a failure and the future of the language is uncertain. If it is not transmitted to future generations, the language will sooner or later fall into the category of dead languages. But even in case of the language death, a number of enthusiasts may initiate its renewal or revival again and extend their motivation to other future learners of the language.

The Irish language is supported not only by the educational system but also by numerous Irish-language organizations. In general, it is a good thing to maintain the linguistic and cultural diversity in as many places as possible across the world, given the fact that there is a genuine will and motivation in a society. Without the existence of true speakers, the language will have become a piece of relic celebrated or revered only in museums, galleries and linguistic institutions, and protected as a treasure, ancestral heritage or symbol. There is a danger that Irish may become part of those passive aspects of identity, which become vivid only during certain festive occasions. It may not be used as a useful communication tool. This can happen if the people who reside in a given territory decide not to carry on the language anymore. On one hand, intergenerational transmission will not take place and some parts of Irish culture based on language may be lost. On the other hand, it is always the choice of the people, their individual right to give up or regain what they desire.

Nobody can be sure what the future holds for the Irish language. It will be possible to measure partial results of the revitalization process after 20 years for which the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language* was adopted. There are always certain risks involved. The situation in Ireland is unique because, as was mentioned before, the Irish language is declared as the first national and official language, so constitutionally it has got preeminent status in comparison with English, although English is spoken by every Irish citizen. Saving the Irish language for future generations could be beneficial in terms of fostering the cultural identity. It is still a part of the Irish folklore and culture. It is also claimed that children attending Irish-medium schools (gaelscoils) tend to perform better than their counterparts in mainstream ordinary schools.

It is important to support the Irish language outside Gaeltacht as well as in the original Irish-speaking, Gaeltacht regions. Keeping Irish alive in predominantly English-speaking regions is a key to its revitalization and sustainability and the survival of Gaeltacht is inevitable for keeping Irish safe for next generations. However, even the future of the Gaeltacht communities remains unclear due to the huge waves of

migrants moving every year into the originally Irish-speaking areas. On the one hand, the real use of Irish in Gaeltacht regions is essential for the existence of their unique Gaeltacht status. On the other hand, the region needs support from cultural tourism, which benefits from English-speaking or other language-speaking foreign tourists.

3. METHOD

This paper is based on a short-term qualitative research, which was realized in the Republic of Ireland in 2015. We were given the possibility to realize our research within the National University of Ireland in the city of Galway (NUIG) at the Centre for Irish Studies. The city of Galway is very close to Gaeltacht communities. We interacted more closely with different informants coming not only from Galway but also from nearby towns like Moycullen, Barna, Furbo, etc. All the data were obtained through the medium of semi-structured individual interviews and focus-group discussions realized with the citizens as well as within particular institutions and organizations residing in the city of Galway and nearby areas and aimed at the Irish language revitalization. The very purpose of this research was to focus on the Irish language and identity. The analysis of the collected data was carried out on the basis of the grounded theory.

A total of 80 respondents took part in the study. Initially, contact was made with the key persons working within or outside academia, just to obtain the most versatile sample of respondents. Afterwards, we used a snowballing technique, which helped us to identify and contact other recommended potential respondents / informants. This enabled us to construct our study. Before we elaborated the study, a detailed coding and analysis had been carried out, according to the principles of the grounded-theory. We do not suggest that the opinions of our respondents on the Irish language and Gaeltacht identity (Gaelic ethnocultural identity) or their language practices are entirely monolithic. We claim that all informants provided us with a wide range of opinions that are noteworthy and offer us a lot of interesting views. The sample is otherwise quite heterogenous comprising respondents of different age groups and professional backgrounds.

Each interview was transcribed and underwent a detailed analysis. The analysis was realized in different steps. The first one was based on creating codes. They were used strategically to point out to the most recurrent topics. They were further placed under deep scrutiny. Specifically, we paid attention to three phases of the coding procedure. We went through open, axial and selective coding. Until the last stage was accomplished, we compared the emerged items gradually, re-reading the interviews, creating categories, codes, identifying relationships among the codes and selecting the core variables. Initially, we started with the research question regarding the Irish language death prevention and language maintenance. During our interviews, we encountered many examples related to how the language could be maintained and language death prevented. These specific examples were marked and assigned with properties and codes. Each significant extract underwent such a scrutiny. The transcribed interviews became a terrain for highlighted extracts (e.g. "I feel afraid of speaking the language") described by codes (speaking Irish) and headings (fear, division).

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE POLICY IN THE LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE PROCESS

An effective language policy is extremely important in the struggle to keep the language alive and language communities sustainable. It plays an enormous role in moderating the decrease of language speakers and preventing the language death. It is generally acknowledged that a large number of the world's languages are in danger of extinction. There are many languages, which are on the verge of death because inter-generational transmission failed and so the language has got only few speakers who are probably the last ones (Aitchinson 2001; Amery 2001).

Concerning the Irish language, there are efforts to minimize the gradual decrease of Irish speakers and outflow of people from the Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) regions. There have been several projects initiated, which could help the Irish language revitalization in Gaeltacht, as well as predominantly English-speaking areas in the long-term horizon. They are part of the official Irish language policy. One of the core documents is the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language*, which promotes reaching societal bilingualism in the period of 20 years with the final year being 2030. *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010—2030* (2010) contains 13 main objectives aimed to support and preserve the language and the Gaeltacht areas. Particular emphasis is placed on education, special support for Gaeltacht, media, defence forces, voluntary sector and status of language within the European Union. The key challenge of the strategy is to increase the number of people speaking Irish, to create opportunities for the language use and to strengthen positive attitude towards the Irish language. Particularly, The government's goal after 20 years of implementing the strategy objectives is to increase the number of people with the knowledge of Irish from 1.66 million to 2 million and the number of daily Irish speakers from 83,000 to 250,000 (*20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010—2030*, 2010).

Furthermore, *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010—2030* is the key document and the base for all institutions and their initiatives supporting the Irish language, including Gaillimh le Gaeilge, Údarás na Gaeltachta and Conradh na Gaeilge. The strategy is designed in a very organized way. On the one hand, the policy communicated through this document is ambitious and clear, but, on the other hand, many people have lost hope in reaching its goals, especially in connection with respecting the Irish language speakers' rights. There are a lot of diverse opinions ranging from negative to indifferent and positive. One of our respondents stated that '*20 year strategy is a disservice to the language, it is like kicking the language down the road, why do we have to wait for 20 years?*' (man, 42). Generally speaking, people perceive it as a joke, there are very ambitious ideas on paper, and a number of people are very angry because there is lack of sincerity and no hope in the implementation of strategy. We can also see a certain kind of apathy in connection with the adoption of the Irish language as one of the EU languages:

- (3) "*Many people say it is a waste of time, I would favour it, but I would not have very good optimism about it, so many volumes of translation will not be read, I do not think that something will be changed, it is significant but not important*" (man, 35).

On the other hand, many people see the recognition of Irish as one of the working languages of EU as a great opportunity for their professional life and career.

- (4) “Official recognition of the Irish language has had huge impact status wide. People realized the value of the Irish language, our undergraduates see that Irish language counts for employment now and it did not count before in the EU, from the perspective of new jobs for translators and interpreters it is very important” (woman, 40).

Alongside the opinions about the lip service to the community, we have identified a group of respondents who have seen the *Official Languages Act 2003*¹ as a good idea. These people do not feel comfortable speaking English. It is their right to use their native language. They stressed the fact that there are still people from the islands who did not have English so much and there is a general societal task to look after them. The Official Languages Act 2003 gives both languages, Irish and English equal status and guarantees that people can use the language of their choice.

The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (2018), in line with the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010—2030*, aims at Irish language revitalization undertaking a range of action plans in a 5-year period. There is a current Action Plan for the 2018—2020 period underway. The department supports Irish as part of the Irish cultural identity and heritage viewing it as an inseparable part of the Irish identity in general. It also initiates various Support Schemes which help to finance the Irish language organizations and activities. As the title indicates, the Department takes care of the Gaeltacht regions, which are deemed as the most significant areas for the Irish language revitalization. Therefore, the department supports the culture, economy and social welfare of the people in the Gaeltacht. Moreover, it is in charge of promoting the Irish language across the whole island of Ireland, North and South. They also regularly approve Irish language programs in other countries. Following the approval by Seán Kyne, the Minister of State for Gaelige, Gaeltacht and the Islands, the Irish language and Irish studies teaching was established in Slovakia at Matej Bel University starting in 2016/2017 academic year.

5. LANGUAGE DEATH

There are many possible factors which can cause language death. In case of the Irish language there was a combination of several environmental, economic, cultural and political factors. First of all we must take into consideration the English colonization policy, the Great Potato Famine, emigration of masses of working class people abroad and death of others. The Great Famine (*an Gorta Mór*) in 1845—47 is considered to be one of the main reasons of Irish decline. The natural disaster also named Potato Famine occurred when potato crops were destroyed for two years in a row. In 1841 the population of Ireland was around 8 million, 2.5 million of which were Irish-speakers. Following that, the famine killed 1.5 million inhabitants of the countryside and caused mass emigration (around 1 million people). The total number of monolingual speakers of Irish had fallen to 5% (Romaine 2008). All of the mentioned events resulted in the rapid decline of Irish speakers, with the Irish language becoming inferior to English. This is how the English language took precedence, over Irish.

¹ The Official Languages Act 2003 preceded the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010—2030. It gives people right to use the language of their choice for communication with state services, be it Irish or English. If they wish they can use Irish in communication with public bodies.

If there are no speakers of a language, the extinction is very close. A language stops to live when no one speaks it anymore (Crystal 2000). According to Aitchison (2001) the language is triggered by social needs. The language can fade away very easily if it is not used for any social purpose within community. It is what happened in Ireland. People started using English as a means of communication not only in public but also at home. Irish was considered as an inferior, backward, rural language in comparison to the more prestigious English, the knowledge of which enabled individuals to gain more chances for improving their life standards and aspire higher at work. These events resulted in an almost radical shift towards the dominant language — English. It all started with a culture clash, which brought about a lot of injustice, inequality, dominance and inferiority (Benčíková 2016).

When mentioning language death, we must take into consideration such factors as language prestige, language usage, language change and, of course, language policy. All of them are intertwined (Theimer 2012). Some of them are measured easier than others. It is very difficult, for example, to evaluate statistically, or in a quantitative way the language prestige or emotional ties towards a specific language which is often subconscious. We do not ask such questions ourselves as to why we speak the language or why we prefer communication in one and not in the other. If there is a good plan how to revitalize the language, then the overall policy is also realized more easily. Nowadays, in our post-factual and multicultural, multilingual world (Höhn, 2011), the policy of one language and one nation cannot be applied anymore. Moreover, it is not desirable. It is more essential to foster respect, tolerance and positive attitudes towards different cultural identities, so that intercultural communication can run smoothly without problems.

Theimer (2012) proposes three important steps which need to be undertaken in order to keep any language alive and to ensure successful language planning process. These are: status planning, corpus planning and acquisition planning. In Ireland they have gone through all the three stages. The status of the language is ensured by the Constitution. The Irish language is given the preeminent status in comparison with the English language, which is defined as the second official language, although it has got an incomparable number of speakers. The Irish language had also undergone the language standardization since the Irish Republic came into being. Since the language revitalization aims of the *20-Year Strategy* will be finally evaluable after the 20-year period is over, only partial findings can be obtained and communicated, reflecting what has been done since the strategy was developed.

As was mentioned before, although the strategy is well-designed, no language plan can ensure life, revival or survival of the language. Any language can die if its speakers freely decide to use another more powerful language as a means of communication. As one of our respondents mentioned:

- (5) *“Irish language is dying, it is being killed by cold blooded decisions taken at civil service level, it is national pride in Ireland that we set up policies which are not implemented in real life” (man, 45).*

This is also an issue of prestige. If there are no material benefits incurred from using the language, then there is only a step to language death as stated by Crystal

(in Theimer 2012) emphasizing the three stages which gradually result in language death, namely: the shift towards the dominant language if there is political, social or economic pressure followed by the period of bilingualism and the last stage is specific for inter-generational transmission failure. The last stage means that there are only the last speakers left alive.

The young generation is very diverse referring to the Irish-language revitalization. There are students who are very weak in using the language on a daily basis and not willing to speak and learn it, but there are also those young people who show very open enthusiasm in keeping the language alive since they view it as beneficial for their future professional identity. For many of our respondents the Irish language constituted one of the important elements of their identity having no problems with how the language was taught:

- (6) *“It was clear for me from 4 years of age that Irish language teachers were very committed to the Irish language and my family had a strong sense of importance given to the Irish language, so I never questioned the position of the Irish in curriculum, I had good, very inspirational teachers”* (man, 47).

There were also respondents for whom both languages were part of their identity, part of their life, or even an emotional thing, since speaking the Irish language can never be neutral, which is very interesting anthropologically, too.

On the other hand, we have identified in our research sample a number of respondents for whom the Irish language constituted just one of the secondary/not so important parts of their identity. Several of them were worried about the language future:

- (7) *“Irish functions at a purely symbolic level, fluency of many is low, it is a kind of diglossia, it functions on a very high symbolical level in society, Irish will continue to be national symbolic language, it will not be a community language, language is a social process not only linguistic, it is very difficult to predict the future of language”* (man, 45).

In this way, the language of ancestors, which was spoken widely up until the second half of the 19th century, does not comply with the way their needs and future expectations are fulfilled in the dominant language, which is considered to be the primary language of communication. The fact is that although many people showed a strong desire to keep the language alive, they expressed their worries about the language in the future. They also purported that one of the reasons, which brought about the Irish speakers decrease, was the English policy of colonization.

The Irish lost its prestige because it was thought to be an inferior language of those backward, rural and ignorant members of society. One of the aims of the colonization typical for any colonization process was the elimination of ethnic pride. Even though the ethnic pride of the Irish people stayed intact as they are still proud of who they are, aware of their distinct language (Irish/Hiberno English) traditions, folklore, etc. and uniqueness of natural and historical artefacts of culture, the language lost its former status. Nowadays, more venues for the language have been opened. There is a need for qualified Irish language teachers, translators and interpreters also due to the fact that in 2007 the Irish language was declared as one of the official languages of the EU. All in all, language needs to be practiced to prevent the language death.

Furthermore, negative attitudes can be also detrimental in terms of the language revitalization process. The Irish language lost its position gradually as it was not considered as a prestigious language anymore and a radical shift towards English took place. Such attitudes have got enormous impact on language life. Positive attitudes can help language to thrive, while the negative and indifferent ones can accelerate its death. It is the same with action, inaction and passivity. If there is motivation, there is also activity. If there is a lack of motivation, inaction is the result.

6. HOW TO PREVENT THE LANGUAGE DEATH?

Enjoying the language brings further benefits to its users since it has got a potential to generate creativity and good feeling from speaking the language. As one of our respondents from Áras na Gaeilge noted:

- (8) *"When Irish go abroad they realize what they have so they start speaking the Irish language in order to differentiate themselves that they are not English"* (woman, 30).

This is a good sign for the language survival. The more people realize that they can make use of the Irish language in different contexts and in real-life situations, the more vitality it can gradually acquire. In such a way, the extinction of the language can be prevented. Moreover, one of the residents of Moycullen stated:

- (9) *"Me and my boyfriend speak in Irish when we want people not to understand"* (woman, 38).

As we can clearly see the Irish language use can generate a certain kind of distinctness of its users which help people not to be understood in strategic cases when it is the main goal in a foreign environment.

Pride in language can also support its vitality and prevent language death. According to Hoffman (2015), people who use Irish in everyday communication and see it as a vital part of their identity, say that they 'have' the language instead of 'speak' it. They represent members of the Irish language community. For them Irish is an element important for their own personal and cultural identity construction.

The joy based in language acquisition can be supported or even increased by various language organizations. One of them is Gaillimh le Gaeilge located in the city of Galway, the only bilingual city in Ireland very close to real Irish-speaking regions, which help businesses with their Irish-language agenda.

- (10) *"We were established to fulfil all those ideas connected with economic, social and cultural values of the Irish language, to show people the benefits of bilingualism, we try to show people that there is huge value in Irish language"* (man, 50).

Learning an ancestral language can help foster personal identity of individuals and strengthen their cultural identity, making the feeling of togetherness stronger. Thanks to the language, people can experience their attachment towards their ancestors and trace their roots through language very easily, too. These are all arguments used by such organizations as Gaillimh le Gaeilge in support of the Irish language revitalization

in different spheres of business. Such activities performed by different subjects can make people realize where their roots are based, where they come from, being proud of their history and ancestral language.

On the other hand, passivity, lack of creativity and motivation, isolation and defensiveness can be detrimental to language preservation. If the language is not valued by its speakers, then it is very near to extinction with the death of its last speakers.

As far as the educational sector is concerned, students in the past were taught Irish in a way that was not very interesting — reciting poetry and learning by drills, which strongly demotivated them to use Irish outside school. It was not enthusiasm which took dominance in the lessons but fear and lack of motivation to learn it properly by means of the old teaching methods based on learning grammar without a proper use of Irish in communication or its spoken form. That is why it was not popular to speak Irish. Nowadays, the situation differs due to the changes in the educational system. The Irish language classes and Irish medium schools have become fashionable and popular among young people now. There is more joy from learning Irish. Young people can apply for work in European institutions where translation and interpreting services are needed. Furthermore, there is a demand for fluent Irish speakers in many public and state institutions across Ireland. Those speaking Irish are not looked down upon anymore for speaking the language. It gives them more prestige. There are conversation circles established in many Irish cities, beginning with the capital Dublin. Children can watch cartoons in Irish or sing hip songs translated into Irish.

Our data makes it evident that there is still a link between language and identity. Although in the future the Irish language will stay marginal in comparison to English in terms of everyday usage, there are still Irish language communities which deserve protection and respect of their linguistic rights. As a way to protect them, there has been created a post of the Language Commissioner responsible for the protection of the rights of those communities.

The interest, motivation, pride and institutional help can reverse the language shift and bring about the gradual increase of Irish speakers beneficial for the languages' existence and vitality.

7. LINGUICIDE AND PREVENTIVE MEASURES AGAINST IT

Linguicide can be made synonymous with language death. There are many factors which can influence people to abandon a language ranging from natural to political reasons. The linguicide can also be brought about by incorporating more syntactical, morphological or lexical items from the dominant language at the expense of the original words, thus destroying its uniqueness and identity created by using it (Hindley 2000). The death of any language can be brought about by the loss of its speakers, due to the lack of motivation to transfer the language from parent to child or by its sudden drop in state and public institutions. This is primarily connected with a more dominant and stronger language. In Ireland it was the English language that acquired the role of

communication medium in private and public life. This was partially influenced by a mass of emigrated working Irish speakers after the Famine of the 1800s. At that time the population of Ireland decreased substantially and has never been recovered. Therefore, it is crucial to support Gaeltacht areas which are literally like bastions of the Irish language. There are many organizations in the Republic of Ireland as well as in the city of Galway, where our research was carried out, which work to prevent the Irish language death. One of them is Údarás na Gaeltachta the members of which

(11) *"try to make realistic and achievable targets for the period of 9 years"* (woman, 42),

One of our respondents pointed that

(12) *"in the future [Gaeltacht identity] will be determined by the level of Irish spoken"* (woman, 38).

The organizations like Údarás na Gaeltachta and many others (Conradh na Gaelige, Gaillimh le Gaelige, the National Irish Language Theatre, the National University of Ireland in the city of Galway (NUIG) etc., the list is not complete) have initiated several projects aimed at the enhancement of the Irish language. In one of such projects mentioned by the employee of Údarás na Gaeltachta

(13) *"we focus on initial/preschool years, we have started a project called two eyes, two ears, two hands, two legs, two languages... of course!"* (woman, 45),

the aim of which is to raise children in a bilingual way stressing the importance and simplicity of speaking two languages.

People working for institutions responsible for language revitalization share the same idea, highlighting the crucial role of arts in the language revitalization process.

(14) *"Support of arts in Gaeltacht, its identity, language, oral art is important, it also helps language planning process, to develop community and to show to people that second language increases job opportunities and that multilingualism is a good thing"* (woman, 45).

Bringing people together during cultural events and showing them how the language can be effectively used to spread arts can increase their interest for the Irish language acquisition creating the basis for intergenerational transmission as one of the pre-conditions to language survival and prevention of language death in the long-term horizon (Mallory 2013).

We believe that art is important to people; from time to time they must be reminded about what makes them different from other nations and constitutes their identity. Although the Irish language is a minority language conditioned by the fact that it is used in everyday communication only by a very small percentage of people, we can see that today arts can be communicated through Irish too. It can be used productively in the area of culture as well as economy. Tourism can also benefit from using Irish. In this way we can view Irish as a cultural and economic asset. New projects have been initiated to support language maintenance, to keep people in Gaeltacht regions and to minimize their out-flow (The Wild Atlantic Way, Irish language courses in Gaeltacht and abroad organized by the Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht, NUIG, etc.).

- (15) *"Recently more places have been opened, preventing the language death, for Irish language normalization, organizing coffee mornings and working with communities"* (man, 50)

as one of the goals of the Conradh na Gaelige (Gaelic League) and other organizations' activities supporting the idea of *cúpla focal* (the idea based on the fact that even with a few words people can have a solid and effective communication). The most important thing is not to be afraid and use whatever vocabulary people have to foster the language and create a positive atmosphere supporting the language revitalization. As one of our respondents from Conradh na Gaelige puts it:

- (16) *"Our classes are much more adaptive now, our Irish language classes bring people together into the class, we try to build a network and create a friendly atmosphere which supports language learning, it can have a cumulative effect"* (man, 60).

The main idea of such coffee meetings in the morning and the Irish language classes offered for different age groups is to foster the idea of *cúpla focal* because it really works as it gets people together. There are different Irish language networks around Ireland. It has got a snow-ball effect, which means that new places for conversation in Irish are being established.

8. INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF IRISH

One of the ways to preserve the language is keeping it alive and maintaining it for future generations. The prerequisite is language transmission, which ideally takes place in households, within families.

- (17) *"If teenagers stay in the Gaeltacht area and establish families then it could be good signal but it is not sure"* (woman, 40).

This is just one of the ways how to keep the Irish language alive through its intergenerational transmission, given the uniqueness and distinctness of Gaeltacht areas. According to Fishman (1991), without intergenerational transmission the language can die. If the help to Gaeltacht regions is not sufficient, Irish in Gaeltacht may die, which can be the end of the language because of the non-existence of L1 speakers.

In the Republic of Ireland, the families which decide to participate in the language revitalization process through bringing up their children partially or totally in the Irish language, are supported by a number of Irish language pre-schools called *naíonraí* and later on by a number of Irish-speaking schools (*gaelscoils*). School plays a central role in reversing the language shift in Gaeltacht areas. It helps the Irish language revitalization in predominantly English speaking areas (Ó Ceallaigh, Ní Dhonnabháin 2015). The schools can help to initiate the parents' motivation to pass on the language further on their children. This idea is reinforced by the organization *Údarás na Gaeltachta* whose main aim is the Irish language support in Gaeltacht regions. It provides help in the form of educational materials, economic and cultural incentives. There is a lot of Irish medium preschools provided by *Údarás na Gaeltachta* helping to sustain Irish in the region.

- (18) *"It is very important to focus on initial/preschool years in order to support inter-generational transmission of Irish"* (woman, 39).

This is also one of the methods helping to keep the language alive through the so called immersion education, which means that at a very early age a child becomes familiar with the basic Irish-language phrases and words and is given the basis for future communication in the language through the medium of a very natural immersion method laying the bases for the creation of bilingual society and its long-term sustainability.

9. THE FUTURE OF THE LANGUAGE

We see that there is a future for the Irish language, especially if we take into account various job positions in which the Irish language skills and competencies are required. Language preservation rests upon the emergence of job market areas where the Irish language can be effectively used. It means that people can get material benefits from the language acquisition.

In many state positions there is a requirement to speak Irish, but the question is to what extent an individual is motivated to use the language and how many people will use the possibility to address such individuals and offices through the medium of Irish. We have in mind the previous failure of Irish language rights' application. According to Theimer (2012) it also depends on the policy of the employer. If employers believe that there is value in using the language, this attitude has a positive impact on employees. The result will be that the people, will be able to see that the service they promise to provide is fulfilled.

There are many organizations in the city of Galway which help different businesses to use the Irish language effectively in their agenda. Our respondent from the Gaillimh le Gaelige (Galway with Irish) confirmed this statement:

- (19) *"So we were established to show people those economic, social and cultural values of the Irish language"* (woman, 45).

The main aim is to try to normalize the language in association with other institutions and organizations to reach bilingualism, giving advice to businesses to incorporate the Irish language into their agenda. The mantra of Gaillimh le Gaelige is selling the Irish language as a unique product as people need to see the economic value in language and Gaillimh le Gaelige employees are there to facilitate it.

There are several factors which may be central to the Irish language revitalization concerning demographic, educational, occupational, social and psychological level of the question. The first one tackles demographic features. We assume that the increase of language centres and language clubs can have a positive effect on language maintenance. Furthermore, language speakers should join their efforts in cities and create more places for conversations in Irish. Thanks to the creation of such networks, learners of Irish can see that there is Irish used in real life settings as an instrument of communication. In this way the language is not seen solely as a symbol, but also as a component of identity which tackles the psychological level of individuals.

There are different attitudes towards Irish ranging from sentimental ones to those attitudes which see Irish as an instrument of communication.

Even though the Irish language has gained its prestige again, there are still worrying issues, like the lack of modern literature written in the Irish language or the lack of Irish language authors.

To sum up what has been said above, there must be economic or material reasons to learn the language if it is going to survive. As it was pointed out by one of the Moycullen residents:

- (20) *“We should encourage social use of Irish, curriculum is wrong, there is too much emphasis on academia than oral speaking”* (man, 50).

This opinion was frequent among the majority of our respondents in different age groups. They stressed the fact that learning by heart does not help the Irish language revitalization at all. Too much memorising in the language class can be detrimental and demotivating for students. Therefore, more attention should be paid to innovative approaches during language classes, with more communication instead of drills and reading old-fashioned pieces of literature.

10. CONCERNS ABOUT THE LANGUAGE

Although the Irish language has gained a lot of popularity within the last decades, there is still a question what would happen if one day it becomes an elective subject. Will there be enough students enrolled in the course in every class and every school across Ireland? Will that not hurt the already weak status of the language?

Language must adapt to new situations in order to stay successful and viable (Huřková, 2016). It must also reflect a new reality (new words, new technologies, new ways of communication) accordingly.

It is true that language planners should be aware of the fact that their decisions, activities and actions can influence the number of speakers. They can also create satisfaction or cynicism in language communities reflecting the loss of loyalty towards the state policy among minority language speakers. It happened with the previous language commissioner who resigned from his post because he could not secure the rights of Irish speakers anymore.

It is generally believed that the Irish language in Gaeltacht is endangered, as it can be deduced from the following opinion of our respondent from Arás na Gaelige:

- (21) *“There was so much damage done to the Gaeltacht that people are just cynical, it is very late to turn back the tide”* (man, 40).

The point is that although a lot of damage has been caused, in the opinion of many, there is still hope for the language on the condition that this belief is shared by the majority of the people concerned. On the one hand, Gaeltacht areas are beautiful regions of magnificent natural phenomena, which attract a lot of English-speaking tourists and support cultural tourism; on the other hand, these regions are economically deprived, so there is an outflow of not only Irish-speaking individuals but also English-speaking individuals. They are also leaving the area. One of the ways to reach language maintenance can be ensured by isolation and lack of mobility

(Edwards 2001). But if the regions are going to be economically sustainable, they cannot close their doors to tourists coming to see the regions and pay for the services offered.

- (22) *“If Gaeltacht areas do not perform in the future they will lose the status of Irish speaking area and the truth is that linguistic situation deteriorates every year”* (man, 45) (respondent from Arás na Gaelige).

This is something Gaeltacht inhabitants must face regularly. Every year the situation gets worse for the language with the arrival of new non-Irish-speaking inhabitants or tourists for whom the region is very attractive. On the one hand, tourism is essential for Gaeltacht survival, but on the other hand, precautions measures should be initiated to find the most suitable solution for both tourists and native inhabitants.

The sustainability of Gaeltacht areas and maintenance of language minority rights is more about the group of Irish-speaking inhabitants than about individual rights (O’Cuív 2008, 2011). Individuals must work as a community, cooperate and participate in common activities and projects aimed at saving the language for future generations. In the opinion of our respondent from the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology:

- (23) *“There is strong need for Irish language areas to be taken seriously by government, the strength from geographical community would be lost if that is not going to be supported”* (woman, 60).

The language maintenance rests upon the economic support of true Gaeltacht regions. In this case economy and survival of the language go hand in hand together. As the respondents indicated, the maintenance of Gaeltacht as a region is a key to successful language revitalization. We have identified several components which are of help to the language vitality and which were mentioned by our respondents. These were: Irish language pre-schools, Gaeltacht youth-clubs, support of language-based activities, Irish courses, language services centres, creating Irish logos, brands used by firms using Irish in their agenda.

11. CONCLUSION

If there are people who are actively using the language, then this is a sign of vitality (Ó Laoire 2012). If the intergenerational transmission is ensured, the future seems bright. In today’s multicultural world it is of benefit to speak different languages which are like windows to different cultures and identities. This is how our horizons can be broadened. It is true that a lack of prestige can be detrimental to any language, be it dominant or minority, regional or lesser-used, therefore effective language planning is a good sign of fulfilling the aims of the language policy. Activity, motivation, effort and positive attitude are the best ways to maintain the vital status of any language. It is a dynamic presentation of culture through language that can ensure the transmission of an autochthonous language for the future generations. On the contrary, inaction can only trigger language death.

It is essential to present language actively in such forms that are motivating and up-to-date. There are sean-nós songs in Ireland and other forms of Irish folklore and culture which can be presented through the medium of the Irish language. Therefore, we assume that there is still an immense value and a potential in the Irish language which can be used in different forms and different sectors, including cultural tourism.

As far as the analysed interviews go, for L1 Irish speakers living in Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking areas) the Irish language is more personal than for the L2 speakers. Gaeltacht people display their identity expressed through Irish. Moreover, Gaeltacht area as a bastion of the Irish language is supported by the organization called *Údarás na Gaeltachta*, which provides learning materials, economic, cultural and financial help for the region. It also supports enterprise and community in cultivating and preserving their original language and culture. Thanks to their initiatives, Irish can be used in terms of cultural tourism as companies which integrate Irish into their agenda are supported. In this way, Irish can be sold as a product. For many people in Gaeltacht, Irish is a key part of their ethnolinguistic identity. Irish pre-school education is established in these areas, and there are also opportunities to enrol in Gaeltacht-based Irish language courses.

Irish language teaching is supported across the whole world. In the USA, Canada and Europe graduates can spend time teaching Irish abroad, thanks to a wide range of scholarships. Irish is supported as no other minority language in the world. It does not lack investments put into it like it is evident in the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish language. However, motivation to use it is crucial. It is because of negative attitudes both in the community and on the government level that the process is hindered.

The question of the Irish language maintenance and revitalization is very broad and complex. As it was mentioned in the analysed interviews, it is also possible to like Irish but to be negative against its users — L1 speakers (those who regard Irish as their mother tongue) which may cause a certain kind of isolationism of L1 and L2 groups. Our respondents often expressed positive attitudes towards Irish as a part of their heritage, culture and identity but this was not matched by their proficiency in it. Therefore, their attitudes contradict the language use.

Finally, we came to the conclusion that all the institutions contributing to the language support are very important for the future of the Irish language. Our assumption proved correct. The more the Irish language cultural activities are realized in Ireland, the more attention the language receives in general. This rests hugely on the provision of financial means allocated to language policy in order to increase the number of people using the Irish language in everyday life.

Another key factor concerning the language rescue rests within the attitudes or approach of people towards the Irish language protection. It is crucial especially for the young generation to see that there are real material benefits gained from the knowledge of Irish which can motivate them to transfer the language to their offsprings, keeping the language for the future generations, thus maintaining its intergenerational transmission.

According to analysed data, there are many people who agree with the revitalization initiatives but are not willing to improve the level of their Irish or learn it. They see the language as a symbolic issue without its practical use. According to our personal experience in Ireland, the Irish language is an important issue among the people and their awareness of the language varies. There are those who are very enthusiastic about the Irish language protection and revitalization. These are the people who consider the

Irish language as an integral part of their identity. This might be because of their Irish-medium upbringing or genuine interest in the Irish language enhancement because of the future work opportunities. Many people in Ireland do not wish to see the Irish language dead. We should not forget about L1 speakers using Irish as their mother tongue, since they have the right to use the language they choose for communication, be it Irish or English. The question of the Irish language survival can be quite an emotional issue, as we could see when analysing the transcribed data from interviews.

There is a multitude of opportunities with Irish nowadays, ranging from teaching positions to business ones. It is interesting to see the rise of bilingual speakers, especially thanks to the Irish-medium education, which is crucial for the language survival. Since there is a decrease of Irish speakers in Gaeltacht areas, it is crucial to support elective bilinguals in their effort to be part of urban language communities. These communities are located across the whole Ireland and are made up of L2 speakers predominantly (for whom Irish is a second language). It is evident that conversational circles established in Dublin or Galway can trigger interest in the Irish language. The increase of Gaelscoils is also remarkable and many governmental organizations help to maintain the Irish language in Gaeltacht, as well as to revitalize it across the whole island of Ireland.

Last but not least, we assume that the Irish language should be promoted more among ordinary people and through popular social media. All languages are important and significant, regardless the number of users, and all of them deserve our respect since they are part of the world's cultural diversity.

Language maintenance is a complicated issue, and an exact solution, one which fits all, does not exist. There has not yet been such a cure found, which would ensure survival of all world-wide endangered minority, regional or lesser-used languages. The question of the Irish language maintenance and language death is open and only the future will show if the number of Irish-speakers increases or shrinks.

We can conclude that, in spite of all the barriers and challenges, the Irish language maintenance and revitalization can still achieve its goals thanks to the motivation, effort and interest of the Irish people to use it outside the educational system. Only time will tell if the link between the Irish language and Irishness, or Irish cultural identity, will persist or perish. There is also another issue which deserves attention — the link between the Irish language and identity. There is still a lot to explore about the link between language and identity in general and only further research will show if the Irish language perishes or stays an important aspect of Irish cultural and national identity.

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