

The Revival of Irish: Why Bother?

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At the heart of Irish Revitalization lies the endeavor in breathing life into the language and re-establishing it as the lingua franca of the state. Spearheaded by the Irish government, there have been waves of concurrent efforts in reviving the language since the 20th century. These tremendous efforts, however, did not successfully bring resurgence to the Irish as seen from the continual decline in the number of fluent speakers. The essay will examine the debates concerning the revival of Irish since 20th century. With reference to the governmental Irish revival project, the essay will support the Irish revitalization and argue that the revitalization is crucial to the establishment of nationalistic cultural identity. It will also demonstrate that the failure of the present revival programme stems from an erroneous focus on enforcing Irish monolingualism and that through rectifying the erring agenda, a possible success of Irish revitalization can be attained.

Revolving around the unsettled debates of Irish revitalization is the major accusation against the programme which is an unrealistic nostalgia and a squandering of public money. Seeing no significance at prolonging the death of an already dying language, opponents regard the Irish government's attempt at reviving the language as "getting a big bonfire" and "throwing all millions of Euros on it" (Welle, 2008). Treating language deaths as "norm[s]" and opposing any attempts at preserving the non-preservable, opponents like Kelvin Myer, a columnist for the Irish Independent in Dublin, criticizes the Irish government for dumping money onto an evidently failed revival program (Welle, 2008). These crude criticisms rest on groundings that presuppose cultural preservation as supplementary and dispensable. Being considered as trivial to fundamental human needs, cultural preservation is not given a substantial consideration. It is therefore ludicrous to some people to spend their limited resources on the "preservation of either [a] language or [a] culture" which they see no importance (Malik, 2000).

However, it is equally arguable that the opponents' distaste for Irish preservation stems from a shallow understanding of how language molds our cultural identity and a failure to recognize the paramount

significance of such identity to our well-being. Connoting solidarity of an ethnic community, language serves as a vital symbol of identity and a “weighty element of self-definition” (Dorais, 1995). Instead of being frivolous to human needs, language casts the colossal influence on the formation of social identity. With communication immersing into daily life, the self image and identity is “constructed entirely through discourse” (Gibson, 2004). Being prominent in everyday life, language has sustained an interwoven relationship with identity. The notion of “ethnic identity” being “twin skin to linguistic identity” has illustrated the power of language in shaping one’s social identity (Gibson, 2004). While a language inhabits the capacity to directly express identity, the choices on languages can significantly affect other’s perception of our identity. Given that it is the hearer who understands and interprets the speaker’s identity, speakers can only make use of their possible linguistic reserve in attempting to construct their identity. With the abandonment of linguistic diversity and a turn to domineering languages, the language reserve which speakers rely on in establishing their identities will be gigantically constrained. In this regard, it is evident that the dispatch of Irish through a permanent discard of the revitalization project will deprive potential Irish speakers from using the language to demonstrate their desired identity. Such linguistic hegemony implies a significant decline in the “self sufficiency” and “independence” of speakers (Gibson, 2004). The end of Irish revitalization signifies the foreseeable death of Irish which will heave an astringent impact on the construction of Irish identity.

Naturalizing language death as an inevitable outcome of the majority’s choice, the opponents also emphasize Irish’s loss of competitiveness in relation to English. When it comes to drawing comparisons between Irish and English, it is often interpreted that Irish is impractical for daily usage particularly in the business sector. Framed as the “tongue for formal” and “ceremonial purposes”, the opponents fail to perceive any environments which essentially require the usage of Irish (Carnie, 1995). While Irish is found usually in publications of poetry and folk tales that only bring reminiscence of the buried past, English is contrastingly seen as the convenient lingua franca which promises ample opportunities and scholastic advancement. Not offering economic appeals or denoting any social prestige, the opponents argue that Irish occupies an undesirable position which brings social estrangement and alienation to some of its speakers (Wright, 1996). In their opinion, the failure of the present Irish revitalization project owes much to its deep-

rooted “language tokenism” (Carnie, 1995). Being associated with the peasants’ language, Irish is negatively stereotyped as the tongue of the ignorant and the benighted. Such unfavorable connotation has strongly discouraged the public from using the language and greatly hindered the success of the revitalization program. Unable to recognize the value of Irish, “cynicism and apathy” are palpable among the public (Wright, 1996). It is under these circumstances that opponents advocate the disposal of the “degrading” and “backbreaking” language in pursuit for the “modern mainstream” (Malik, 2000).

In their pessimistic portrayal of Irish as the unprivileged, demeaning language, the opponents relapsed into misunderstanding of the backwardness associated with Irish peasants. Language and its connotations are not rigid systems that permanently depict a single fixed image, instead it advances along with the changing periods. Similarly, perceptions toward a language in the long run are not shaped by its ancestral speakers and tend to change flexibly according to the popularity of its usage. English, for instance, was once considered the tongue of peasantry and coarseness during the 1100s. While Norman French and Latin sustained their positions as the language of England’s bureaucracy, English was merely spoken by peasants and was “relieved of many of its functions” in governmental, legal, religious and educational work (Finegan, 1989). In such case, if language was permanently shaped by its ancestral speakers and discarded due to its low origin, English would not be able to thrive and attain its present status. Hence, a widespread usage and recognition of Irish’s socio-linguistic values is pivotal in empowering the language with “political weight” and “economic strength” (Dorais, 1995). Upon regaining recognition and favoritism from the public, the connotation tagged along the Irish language will be renewed. In addition, the peasant image does not necessarily represent barbarism. When viewing the peasant image under Irish “linguistic nationalism”, such figure essentially illustrates the “Perfect Irishman” icon which complies with the “Romantic philosophy of Irish Ireland” (Wright, 1996). The idea of Romantic Ireland is sketched with the intense sentiments for locality, language and identity. This connection between nationalism and language supports the notion of viewing Irish as a cultural symbol of the Irish identity.

Criticizing Irish revitalization program as a coercive enforcement upon unwilling language learners, the opponents also relate the reluctance in learning Irish among Irish students as the detrimental cause of the failed revitalization project. With its distinctly different spelling system and VSO syntax, Irish is perceived

as one of the hardest languages to learn. This negative portrayal of Irish has steered away the public's willingness to learn the language and consequently led to the avoidance of the revitalization program (Carnie, 1995). In this case, the compulsory Irish teaching hour at school has aroused tremendous force of antagonism among students. Opponents also argue that a mere hour of Irish lesson per day is far from enough in making the students competent speakers of the language. In a situation where there are limited environments for the practice of Irish, students are left with isolated Irish phrases and terms that do not connect and interact with the present daily life. With language being a "subconscious system", its acquirement grounds on a "constant and consistent input" (Carnie, 1995). It is therefore believed that the brief and unconnected Irish lessons will have little impacts on learners and can barely alter the unavoidable death of Irish.

It is true that the governmental Irish revitalization project fails to provide adequate linguistic environments for students to practice the language and that present Irish-related language policies at school fails to promise an impetus in motivating students to speak the language during off-school hours. Yet, such reasons should not constitute a barrier for the continuation of the Irish revival project. Rather, it reveals the lapses of the current revival project and prepares the government for a more comprehensive readjustment on Irish language policies. Highlighted by the opponents, the language policies at school fail to offer students incentives to learn the language. The Irish government has not centered its focus on "cultural motivation", which can significantly arouse more interest in the language (Wright, 1996). Though forceful language policies can superficially put students into learning Irish, it demonstrates no significance in the long run as it generates resentment towards the language and fails to capture genuine initiatives. To promote Irish as a leisure and highly-interesting language option, it is crucial for the government to expand the present revival project into including massive materials on modern Irish literature. Beginning to realize the importance of stimulating Irish cultural awareness, the government has recently tried to incorporate Irish literature into the syllabus in the hope of cultivating a "love for Irish literature" and "underpin the spoken language" (Wright, 1996). With Irish literature being underscored in language policies, it is highly plausible that genuine interests in the language will be elicited and old resentment will be washed.

With its important implications on the construction of nationalistic identity, the continuation of Irish revitalization should be encouraged. With the “isomorphic relation” between language and nationalism, Irish can be considered as the indispensable and “universal element of national life” (French, 2009). While a language marks the uniqueness of a group and further confirms group solidarity, the speaking of Irish in essence resembles the “collective sameness” among Irish people and constructs their Irish identity (French, 2009). In an ideological view of Irish, the language weighs heavily particularly to Northern Irish people who believe the speaking of their own language expresses their hope for Irish sovereignty. While Irish seems to be resented by students in the Independent State of Ireland, the language is very much active and gains considerable favoritism among youngsters in the other part of Northern Ireland. The “Perfect Irishman” icon is received with both a “mixture of admiration and superiority” (Wright, 1996). Northern Irish adolescents value their nationalistic identity and consider Irish as the perfect representation of their nationalistic sentiments. Such pursuit for nationalistic identity through the learning of Irish is not merely the practice among the middle class elites in Northern Ireland. In fact, the language is highly favored by the working class and learnt as a means to affirm their Irish identity (Wright, 1996). There are cases where students voluntarily “sign up to study entirely” in Irish (Mackey, 2009). While opponents realize no significance and scorn at the efforts used in revitalizing Irish, the nationalistic communities in Northern Ireland have overthrown their claims by demonstrating their ambition in mastering the language as a proclamation of their Irish identity.

The fact that Irish serves as an emblem of the Irish identity, however, does not advocate the idea of monolingualism. In advocating the Irish revitalization programme, language campaigners do not aim at molding Irish into the only tongue in Ireland. In strongly associating Irish with a unique Irish identity, nationalist communities may easily fall into the temptation of perceiving Irish as “diametrically opposed to all British influence” (Wright, 1996). If such attempt continues to lead the Irish revitalization project, the programme will likely be subject to another failure. Given that some speakers may hope to construct their identities in relation to cultures other than Irish, a coercive enforcement of Irish monolingualism will be severely objected. In view of this, it is important for the Irish government to mold their Irish revival policies

in favour of a “societal bilingualism” (Wright, 1996). Under such advocate of linguistic diversity, speakers will be free and competent in choosing the language they wish to be identified with.

Blinded by the mist of misconception towards Irish, the opponents refrain themselves from viewing the significant representations behind the language. Not only does the Irish embody an epoch of cultural history, its usage also signifies the strengthening of a nationalistic Irish identity. Its revitalization is crucial to many Irish people and potential speakers who wish to identify themselves with the Irish Ireland. It is such revitalization that empowers speakers with a larger pool of linguistic resources in constructing and presenting their social identity to others. Instead of neglecting the socio-cultural significance of Irish, emphasis should be put on realizing ways that the Irish government can improve from its previous revitalization experience. Rather than merely focusing on cultivating linguistic competence of Irish learners, more effort should be put on eliciting genuine interest towards the language.

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