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Gaeilge in Éirinn: Irish Language Ideologies and Attitudes in a Divided Island Nation

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Abstract: Sociolinguistic research on Irish has predominantly examined language dynamics within either the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland, neglecting the connected experiences of language communities across both territories. Drawing on media and interview data, this paper investigates the significance of a shared 'language=identity' ideology. The results reveal that despite most Irish identifying individuals operating within this framework, diverse controversies regarding attitudes towards language legitimacy, speaker agency, and perceived 'usefulness' affect native and new speaker language use and motivation. These findings underscore the need for language reclamation and revitalization projects to address language ideologies and attitudes.

Keywords: *Irish language, Language ideologies, Language attitudes, Language reclamation, Language revitalization, Minority and endangered languages, Interview data, Online discourse*

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1 Introduction

Gaeilge, or the Irish language, is the indigenous[1] language of *Éire*, or Ireland. Irish is a member of the Celtic language branch of the Indo-European language family. As a Goidelic language of the Insular Celtic branch, the language is closely related to *Gàidhlig* (Gaelic/Scottish Gaelic, Scotland) and *Gaelg* (Manx, Isle of Man). Irish is also more distantly related to *Cymraeg* (Welsh, Wales), *Brezhoneg* (Breton, Brittany), and *Kernewek* (Cornish, Cornwall), which are all Brittonic languages of the same Insular Celtic branch. Although English became dominant in most of Ireland during the 19th century, some areas have maintained a larger proportion of native Irish speakers – these areas are known as the *Gaeltacht.* There are three main rural Gaeltachtaí that correspond to three recognized dialects of Irish: Munster, Connacht, and Ulster. Additional areas with emergent networks of Irish language speakers have often been called *Líonraí Gaeilge* ('Irish language networks'), including those found in urban settings – such as the vibrant language community in west Belfast – which have also been called urban Gaeltachtaí. The term *Nua-Ghaeltacht* ('Neo-Gaeltacht') has also been used to refer to these areas.

The Irish language has been a vibrant topic in sociolinguistic fields of study, particularly for those interested in minority and endangered languages and efforts for language reclamation and revitalization.[2] The case of the Irish language is particularly interesting because of the political division resulting from *Críochdheighilt na hÉireann* (the partition of Ireland, 1921), which separated the island country into two nation-states: the Irish Free State (which is now the Republic of Ireland), and Northern Ireland. Ireland provides a unique lens with which to view language reclamation because of the political divide between the North and the Republic. In both Northern Ireland and the Republic, language reclamation efforts face challenges common to similar movements elsewhere, including a lack of motivation for learning and using the language. Rather than economic mobility or necessity, it is often an ideological commitment and deconstruction of negative language attitudes that drive individuals to acquire and/or promote minority languages (Armstrong, 2012; Dołowy-Rybińska & Hornsby, 2021). Due to immensely distinct political and social climates dividing the island, attitudes surrounding linguistic reclamation look very different on each side of the border. Language ideologies are the thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and assumptions through which speakers and listeners make sense of linguistic differences (Dołowy-Rybińska & Hornsby, 2021: 104). These ideologies can surface in language attitudes, understood here as explicit evaluations often expressed as opinions or prejudices – which can have significant impacts on attempts at language reclamation and revitalization (Dołowy-Rybińska &

[1] Irish is considered an indigenous language in Ireland because it has been spoken by the native inhabitants of the land before the arrival of English colonists. (For more on Irish indigeneity see Section 2.1)

[2] Note that these two terms (language revitalization and language reclamation) are understood in linguistic theory as two distinct theoretical approaches; this is discussed in the later subsection of the introduction regarding my theoretical framework.

Hornsby, 2021: 104). For example, positive language attitudes often correlate with stronger desires to learn and/or use that language. Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin likewise notes that "It is the covert, hidden ideologies [which are made apparent through explicit expressions of language attitudes] that are the real determinants of language practices and sociolinguistic vitality, inclusion, and exclusion" (Armstrong, 2012: 151).

This paper examines certain key underlying ideologies of the Irish language that exist within an overarching umbrella ideology that links language and identity; it explores how they are revealed in expressions of language attitudes in discourse about both language reclamation and the language itself; and it investigates how these ideologies and attitudes differ between the North and South of the island nation. The results show that despite a prevailing acceptance of the 'language=identity' ideology among Irish individuals, diverse controversies regarding language legitimacy, speaker agency, and perceived utility influence native and new speaker language use and motivation. Thus, this study highlights the imperative for language reclamation and revitalization initiatives to address and counteract these entrenched language ideologies and attitudes. The remainder of this introductory section outlines the research methodology (1.1) and theoretical framework (1.2) employed throughout the paper, as well as a brief overview of Irish history that is necessary to contextualize the present linguistic situation (1.3). The main sections of this paper outline three significant areas in which ideologies and attitudes are most prevalent and visible. Section 2 introduces the overarching 'language=identity' ideology as it relates to individual and group consciousness, exploring attitudes about personal, national, and linguistic legitimacy. Section 3 shows how the presentation of the Irish language in the linguistic landscape both reflects and maintains certain language attitudes. Section 4 builds upon these previous chapters by illustrating how language ideologies and attitudes impact Irish language education and motivation on either side of the political border.

1.1 Research Methodology

As an Irish American with roots from Derry, my diasporic heritage profoundly influences my academic pursuit of Irish language and culture. In addition to Irish heritage, I descend also from the English settler colonists who displaced the Indigenous peoples in North America. I acknowledge this side of my heritage because I cannot neglect the related histories of American Indigenous experiences. Therefore, by exploring the interplay between language and identity, I aim to not only deepen our understanding of Irish culture but also contribute to ongoing conversations about both diasporic experiences and solidarity for the preservation and reclamation of minoritized indigenous cultural heritages.

The methodological framework of my research is rooted in a sociocultural investigation of Irish language ideologies and attitudes as they relate to and impact the movement for Irish language reclamation and revival. This is performed through unstructured

ethnographic interviews and contextualized online media discourse. Additionally, I incorporate an exploration of the Irish linguistic landscape in Section 3, specifically the ways in which the Irish language appears in public spaces and the reactions and attitudes about these appearances.

Having made some connections during a semester spent in Dublin and at Queen's University in Belfast, I was able to meet virtually with three Irish individuals from diverse backgrounds. I had hour-long unstructured individual ethnographic interviews with a man from Dublin, Lucas (24 years old), a woman raised in west Belfast, Órla (30 years old), and a woman who grew up in county Louth and later moved to Belfast, Síobhra (33 years old). While discussing individual experiences and attitudes towards the Irish language, all three participants were able to offer a wide range of opinions and comments. Interviews were all conducted using English. Órla and Síobhra's interviews were recorded using the video-conferencing platform, Zoom, and are transcribed through discourse transcription conventions outlined by Du Bois et al. (1993). I was unable to record my interview with Lucas, resulting in shorter quotes and statements without discourse transcription. All three interviewees gave permission for their interview quotes to appear publicly in this paper.

In addition to these interviews, digital and social media provided additional data for the foundations of my research. These new technologies have emerged as a significant subject for research into the maintenance, documentation, and revitalization of minority languages (Cru, 2018; Belmar & Glass, 2019; Buszard-Welcher, 2001; Moriarty, 2011). Media communication practices "both shape and are informed by" language ideologies, which in turn "crucially influence" language practices (Eisenlohr, 2004: 21). Therefore, by observing language and content choices in virtual spaces, we can examine various language attitudes and ideological expressions.

The two sites with which I most readily engage are Reddit and X (formerly called Twitter). Reddit is an online social networking platform that provides discussion forums and polls about topics ranging from politics, news, and sports, to funny videos and pictures, to how-to guides. Registered users can post content to various organized boards called subreddits. Users can post comments and reply to comments within a post's thread, and they can also 'up-vote' and 'down-vote' comments made by other users. On X, another social network site, registered users can post text, images, or videos to their own personal page, which can either be public or private. Users can engage with other posts by replying, reposting, or liking them. Additional media sources include Discord (an instant messaging and voice / video call social platform) and Facebook (another social-networking website).

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Language Ideologies

Language ideologies are the thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and assumptions through which speakers and listeners make sense of linguistic differences and project these notions onto certain people and things. Closely connected to stereotypes, language ideologies unconsciously assign certain traits or characteristics to languages and their speakers, even when there is no objective evidence to demonstrate them (Dołowy-Rybińska & Hornsby, 2021: 105). For example, the belief that the Irish language contributes to a sense of Irish identity is an ideologically based attribution that can surface through explicit statements called **language attitudes**.

It should be made clear that language is always experienced and understood in concert with various other semiotic systems. By specifying ‘language’ ideologies here, I do not intend to assume that language is a discrete object separate from other discrete semiotic systems, but rather to discuss ideologies that focus on language as a semiotic relationship. The term 'ideology' is used here in order to encompass the political and moral issues that lie within these thoughts and beliefs, and to acknowledge that they are likewise subject to the social position and interests of the subject (Irvine & Gal, 2000: 35). It is important to address, however, that this term has historically been used to apply only to particular worldviews that are then dismissed as 'false consciousness'. Here, I turn to Irvine who explains a use of the term ‘ideology’ to show a sense of partiality: “incomplete because there are other ways of viewing it; but also partial in the sense of (politically) interested, coming from a specifiable subject position with a point of view and projects for social action” (Irvine, 2021: 226). Used this way, rather than implying only certain people have ideologies, we acknowledge that 'there is no view from nowhere'. In Irvine’s words: “We all do ideological work. Everybody draws on presumptions about the world that fit with their own projects” (Irvine, 2021: 232). There is no person who does not have certain assumptions about the world; all people have worldviews that shape how they see and act in the world.

Language Attitudes

Although this term is often used interchangeably with language ideology, Dolowy-Rybińska and Hornsby (2021) have shown that the distinction between **language ideologies** and **language attitudes** is essential, particularly in discussions of language reclamation. Language attitudes “are the explicit evaluations of particular languages and language varieties, expressed by people as opinions and beliefs and, more negatively, as prejudices” (Dołowy-Rybińska & Hornsby, 2021: 106). These attitudes come directly from those deeply ingrained language ideologies that have become so internalized in a community that they are often understood as natural; they are a "bridge between language ideologies and

behaviors" (Dołowy-Rybińska & Hornsby, 2021: 110). Thus, it is through language attitudes that the subconscious language ideologies are made apparent. This is important to language reclamation because while there can be a positive association with the target language in the ideological framework, negative attitudes towards its perceived usefulness or opinions and prejudices about the language and its speakers can affect motivations for speakers to learn or speak that language. Indeed, despite a deeply embedded ideology in the Republic population that the Irish language is vital for an Irish identity and culture, according to the census in 2022, only about 1.25% of people in the south report using Irish on a daily basis (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2023).

Language Revitalization & Reclamation

Many minority and endangered language communities have continued or begun prolonged efforts to strengthen and encourage speakers in order to keep the languages 'alive'. Many different terms representing varying frameworks and processes have been used to describe these efforts. Language **revitalization** provides a framework that focuses mainly on quantitative measures of linguistic vitality such as speaker numbers. This term is helpful in understanding a language as something that, hypothetically, anyone has the capability to participate in. Language **reclamation**, on the other hand, provides a framework that incorporates the sociocultural community environments from which a language originates (Leonard, 2017: 15). Thus, the term language reclamation presents a broader perspective that "is not about preserving the abstract entity 'language,' but is rather about voice, which encapsulates personal and communal agency and the expression of Indigenous identities, belonging, and responsibility to self and community" (McCarty et al., 2018: 160).

Each of these frameworks can be extremely beneficial to some individuals or internal language communities while simultaneously harmful to others. Leonard describes how certain reclamation programs can be in danger of evoking “an essentialist notion of culture whereby participants feel pressure to act, think or speak in certain ways, particularly those that are deemed to be ‘traditional’” (Leonard, 2012: 339). In other words, a reclamation framework that relies so heavily on the sociocultural 'voice' risks deterring those participants that may not be interested in the non-linguistic aspects of the culture that is connected to the language. On the other hand, certain revitalization programs are in danger of presenting a language without certain significant social contexts that are necessary for a holistic understanding of the language and its importance in its original community.

These frameworks are a common site of conflict in discussions and plans for language reclamation, and are certainly present in Irish language reclamation. In his book, *The Fortunes of the Irish Language,* Daniel Corkery claims that "to say tradition is to say language" (Corkery, 1968: 14). This extends beyond an abstract notion of 'tradition' as well: many of those involved in the Irish language radio station Radio na Gaeltachta (RnG), for

example, consider "traditional music values and language values [...] to be inseparable" (Cotter, 2001: 307). In response, Ó Dónaill writes:

> It is arrogant to say that young people ought to listen to the kind of music that interests us and that they are not properly Irish unless they do the same! Irish isn't a package deal–a person should be able to be interested in the language but ignore other aspects of the culture if he or she is inclined to do that. (Ó Dónaill, 1995, as cited and translated in Cotter, 2001: 307)

While an emphasis on tradition can be empowering for those that identify with it, it can be isolating for those that do not. Leonard explains that those who do not identify with certain 'traditions' are faced with a double-edged sword: "*Not* taking part in a given cultural practice carries negative social consequences; acquiescing to doing something that runs contrary to one's beliefs carries personal ones" (Leonard, 2012: 340). The reclamation and revitalization frameworks can be helpful depending on the specific goal of a certain project; while the language revitalization framework is key for attracting new speakers and motivating general language use, reclamation can be empowering even without necessarily fostering new speakers. For example, the anglicization processes in Ireland included anglicizing the spelling and format of Irish names; while the ‘re-Gaelicizing’ process of reclaiming the original indigenous Irish version of one’s name does not contribute to a goal for increasing speakers, it is a very significant form of language reclamation that can contribute to an individual sense of identity reclamation (see Section 2.1).

1.3 Historical Context of the Irish Language

From an early prehistoric era until the 1600s, a Gaelic political, social, and cultural system predominated the island of Ireland (Cunliffe & Koch, 2019). This period and system, known as Gaelic Ireland, maintained an oral culture through the *seanchaithe*, or ‘custodians of tradition and history’. Surviving inscriptions of names and territory markers on stones show evidence of a writing system during the 4th century C.E., although some scholars claim the stones date to as early as the 1st century B.C.E. (Carney, 1975; MacNeill, 1929). The alphabet that was used, called the Ogham alphabet, has also been called the Celtic tree alphabet as a result of each letter’s connection to the Irish names for various trees. Beginning in the 5th century C.E., the introduction of Christianity brought practices of literature to Ireland. Records from Irish monks were prominent through the Middle Ages, including records of the Brehon laws (the early Irish legal system).

In the late 12th century, the *Sean-Ghaill* (Anglo-Normans) began to settle in Ireland, bringing with them a period of multilingualism with French and English, with Irish remaining a dominant language. Throughout the 14th and 15th centuries, English began to displace French and Latin as the administrative language and became an intermediary

communication tool between Ireland and Europe (O'Rourke & Walsh, 2021: 1). The English conquest of Ireland, culminating in the 1601 *Léigear Chionn tSáile* (the Siege of Kinsale), marked the end of independent Gaelic lordships and the Irish-speaking political elite (McGurk, 2001). As the native Irish Brehon laws were replaced with English Common law, the status of Irish as a major language was lost, yielded to English as the language of legal, administrative, and economic affairs, as well as of social clout. Following a larger pattern of states imposing language standardization policies, Irish began to sharply decline with the formation of the nation-state in the eighteenth century (Glass & Belmar, 2019: 3). Extended and exacerbated periods of anglicization alongside the immense emigrations and deaths of Irish speakers during *an Gorta Mór,* (the Great Famine) – the horrific period in the mid-nineteenth century of starvation brought about from harsh British colonial policy (often understood as a genocide) – left Irish speakers in the margins as a minority speaker community.

In the final quarter of the nineteenth century, interest in reviving Irish as a spoken language, as well as efforts to establish designated cultural spaces sprung up quite strongly; this period was known as the *Athbheochan na Gaeilge*, or the 'Gaelic Revival.' During this time, many groups and associations were founded in the name of this cause, including: *Cumann Buan-Choimeádta na Gaeilge* (Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, 1876), *Cumann Lùthchleas Gael* (Gaelic Athletic Association or GAA, 1884), and *Conradh na Gaeilge* (the Gaelic League, 1893). During the following years, cultural reclamation efforts gained momentum as a tool to strive for Irish independence in the *Cogadh na Saoirse* (the War of Independence, or the Anglo-Irish War). This conflict, lasting from 1919-1921, culminated in the *Críochdheighilt na hÉireann* (the partition of Ireland), which divided the thirty-two county nation in two: twenty-six counties in the independent Irish Free State, and the remaining six in Northern Ireland, which remained a part of the United Kingdom. As the island nation divided into two separate political bodies, the language conversation diverged amidst arising differences in political and social situations.

Most notably, Northern Ireland has been deeply affected by ethnonational conflict, famously known as the Troubles (1960s - 1998). While religious terms were often used to describe the conflict, such as Catholic nationalists versus Protestant unionists, it was fundamentally an ethnonational struggle at its core. The IRA (Irish Republican Army), composed primarily of Irish Republicans, engaged in guerrilla warfare tactics against British rule in Northern Ireland, while loyalist paramilitaries carried out violent attacks in defense of their political priorities. The violence and political tensions endured for decades, leaving deep scars on communities and the region as a whole. One of these scars is directly tied to the Irish language, which has been described as "the defining symbolic element of the political violence that has shaped the history of Northern Ireland" (Mac Giolla Chríost 2012: 2). Issues of identity between self-defining Irish and self-defining British individuals have been reignited in the political domain following Brexit, in which the United Kingdom

withdrew from the European Union (proposed 2016, enacted 2022). Indeed, earlier this year, Northern Ireland's first minister, Michelle O'Neill, reflected on a "new decade of opportunity" as she expects a referendum on Irish reunification within the next decade (France-Presse, 2024).

We now turn to investigating ideologies and attitudes observed within the interviews and media data in terms of an overarching 'language=identity' ideology. First, exploring the 'language=identity' ideology reveals its impact on individual and group consciousness, encompassing attitudes towards personal, national, and linguistic legitimacy. Building on the significance of language to identity, Section 3 examines the portrayal of Irish in the linguistic landscape, highlighting its role in reflecting and perpetuating specific language attitudes. The final section further illustrates the influence of language ideologies and attitudes on Irish language education and motivation across both sides of the political border. The findings indicate that while many Irish identify within this identity framework, varied controversies surrounding attitudes towards language legitimacy, speaker agency, and perceived 'usefulness' impact both native and new speaker language usage and motivation, emphasizing the necessity for language reclamation and revitalization initiatives to engage more thoroughly with language ideologies and attitudes.

2 'We are our language'; Gaeilge and Social Identity

A deeply ingrained language ideology in community consciousness is the notion that language is directly linked to our personal identity, that 'we are our language'. This phrase is common to minority language contexts and reclamation discourse (Meek, 2010). The questions that arise to make sense of this statement serve to illustrate the diverse overlapping and often conflicting ideologies and attitudes that are at play: *Who* gets to be part of the 'we' that 'owns' the language?; *Which* language or dialect has the ability to define them?; and *How* is it defining them? These are the core questions we will explore throughout this chapter.

This 'language-mediated attribution of identity' is so ingrained in human interactions and social consciousness that it is accepted as natural; indeed, a person that lacks a name may even be considered to lack an identity (Llamas & Watt, 2010: 1). Beyond just the individual, there are also various group identities that humans as social creatures create and claim. In their exploration of language in the construction, negotiation, maintenance, and performance of human identities, Llamas and Watt (2010: 1) explain how "all sociolinguistically competent language users can draw upon an array of linguistic resources for foregrounding different aspects of their identities in particular contexts at particular times."

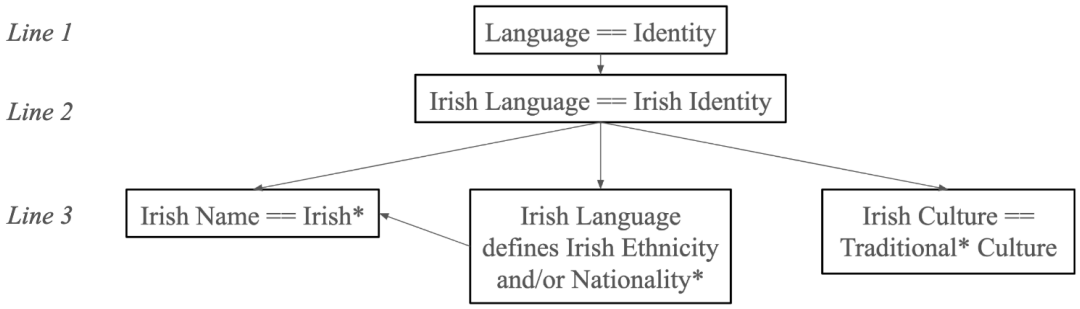

Figure 1: *Ideological Frameworks: Personal + Group Social Identities*

This section outlines how the overarching ideology ‘language=identity’ surfaces for individual and group consciousness in Ireland. Figure 1 provides a visualization that represents various personal identity language ideologies present in the language attitudes I have observed. The core ideology (line 1) encompasses all uses of language as tied to distinct identities. Stemming from this, the next ideology (line 2) equates the Irish language with a distinctly Irish identity. This is then broken up into the three core themes explored in each subsection (line 3). Asterisks call attention to the terms 'Irish(ness)', 'Irish Ethnicity and/or Nationality', and 'Traditional (Irish) Culture'; these terms are further coded with distinct ideological understandings of particular identities (discussed in each respective subsection).

2.1 *Cad is ainm duit?*: Irish Names and Identity

Names, whether first, middle, or last, hold a profound psychological connection to both personal and communal identity (Mac Mathúna, 2006: 2). While many receive their given birth names, some opt for name changes later in life to better align with their identity. However, naming has also been a tool of oppression, such as the use of names as weapons against many enslaved individuals in the Americas (Stuckey, 2013: 217). In Ireland, as a result of early-colonial practices institutionalized by English Common Law, many Irish names were anglicized. As illustrated in Figure 2, these alternative versions of Irish names have become indexes for certain identities related to notions of 'Irishness'. The main ideology (line 1) branches into understandings of Irish names and 'Irishness' first as a binary identity (line 2), and then on more of a spectrum (line 3).

All three of the interviewees – Lucas, Órla, and Síobhra – brought up their names in our conversations about identity and language, specifically linking it to various feelings about their perceived 'Irishness'. In this section, we will explore how Órla makes sense of the two versions of her surname, the link between Síobhra's first name and her relationship with the Irish language, and how Lucas understands his Romanian surname alongside his Irish identity.

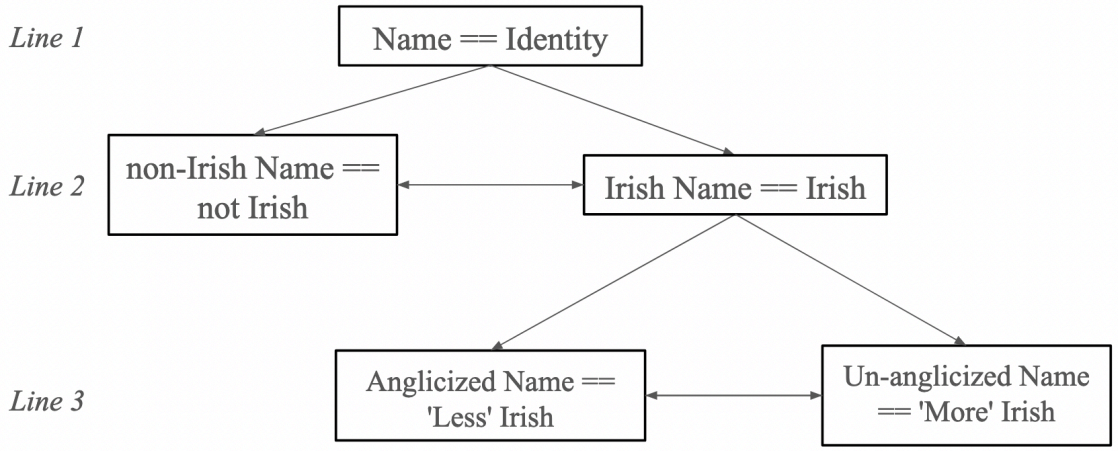

Figure 2: *Ideological Frameworks: Names and 'Irishness'*

Utilizing the authentic Irish version of Irish surnames has emerged as a significant form of reclaiming linguistic and cultural heritage. In the late 19th century *Athbheochan na Gaeilge* (Gaelic Revival), there was a surge in restoring the original spellings and pronunciations of Irish surnames. Indeed the progress of this revival was closely associated with reverting to the genuine Irish language versions of surnames (Mac Mathúna, 2006: 73). The most common form of Gaelic surname anglicisation was phonetic approximation, "whereby the sounds occurring in the Irish name were assimilated to the sound system of English and represented according to the conventions of English orthography" (Mac Mathúna, 2006: 68). Additionally, although Irish surnames were distinct for those perceived as men and women, the anglicized name was based on the unmarked male form (Mac Mathúna, 2006: 76). Table 1 provides an example of the various ways that the Irish surnames Ní Bhreithiún and Mac an Bhreithiún (the male counterpart) have been anglicized.

Irish Version of Surname	**Anglicized Version of Surname**
Mac an Bhreithiún [mak ən bʲɾeːçuːn] *(lit. 'son of the judge')* Ní Bhreithiún [ni bʲɾeːçuːn] *(lit. 'daughter of the judge')*	MacEbrehowne MacEbrehan MacAbrehan MacAbreham Abraham Breheny Judge

Table 1: *Possible Anglicized Forms*
Note. This table was adapted from Table 3.6 in Mac Mathúna (2006: 69).

Although many individuals tend to accept both versions (anglicized and original Irish Gaelic) of their surname in some way, many others have strong views one way or another. For instance, when introducing herself for our interview, Órla noted the importance of her Irish name:

ÓRLA; 1 My name is Órla McGurk–
2 Órla Nig Oirc.
3 em,
4 McGurk is,
5 what we call our slave names,
6 over here,
7 @@@ so.
8 ah,
9 I try to use my indigenous name as much as I can.

(Órla, Personal Interview, January 4, 2024)

By referring to the anglicized McGurk as a 'slave name', Órla notes the immense negativity that is often associated with anglicized names, calling to mind the institutionalized oppression enforced upon the Irish peoples by the English. By refusing the ‘slave name,’ individuals reclaim power and agency over their identity, emancipating this identity through the language of their names. Operating in the 'language=identity' framework, by using her “indigenous name,” Órla, like many others, strives to index her Irishness, specifically in opposition to a perceived English or anglicized identity that may come with the anglicized name. Irish identity and names extend to personal first names as well, and is equally emotionally charged; in 1986, Dúbhglas de hÍde writes:

> "The man whom you call Diarmuid when you speak Irish, a low, pernicious, un-Irish, de- testable custom, begot by slavery, propagated by cringing, and fostered by flunkeyism, forces you to call Jeremiah when you speak English, or as a concession, Darby. [...] Surely Sadhbh (Sive) is a prettier name than Sabina or Sibby [...] Aoife (Eefy), Sighle (Sheela), Móirín (Moreen), Nuala and Fionnuala (Finnoola)" (Hyde, 1986 as cited in Mac Mathúna, 2006: 72)

In his statement, hÍde uses many explicit statements about the language–language attitudes– that stem from significant underlying ideologies. Just as we have seen for surnames, traditional Irish first names can also be anglicized and altered. Here, hÍde refers to these anglicized names as "un-Irish," thus implying that the people themselves could likewise be considered somehow less Irish due to their compliance with a name "begot by slavery". hÍde shows immense frustration with anglicization for anglicization's sake, asserting that the changes are not justified on multiple levels; he writes, "the indigenous Teig is West-britonised [i.e., anglicized] into Thaddeus or Thady, for no earthly reason than that both begin with a T" (Hyde, 1986 as cited in Mac Mathúna, 2006: 72). Likewise, he notes that the

Irish name Nóra becomes 'Honny' or 'Honour' because it sounds similar to the Irish word *onóir,* meaning 'honor' (Hyde, 1986 as cited in Mac Mathúna, 2006: 72). This reveals that the significance of an Irish name, at least for hÍde, cannot be successfully 'anglicized' in a meaningful way. Finally, hÍde notes that the Irish names Sadhbh, Aoife, Sighle, Móirín, Nuala, and Fionnuala are "prettier" than their anglicized counterparts. This language attitude is rooted in an ideology claiming that the Irish language is more beautiful than English (or possibly other languages). This ideology is evident in the immensely popular notion that the language itself is inherently poetic.

During my interview with Síobhra, she linked her Irish name specifically to the language itself, noting the "difficult spelling" of her name as a significant part of its 'Irishness'. The notion that Irish is a difficult language to read, learn, and understand, is quite prominent here (note also how hÍde follows each Irish spelling of the feminine names with a phonetic English orthography). After asking about how the Irish language contributes to her identity, Síobhra first pointed out her name:

SÍOBHRA;	1	I suppose em (Hx:)
	2	…
	3	(H) uh– (H)
	4	just by-the-back
	5	I have a,
	6	an Irish name.
	7	Síobhra.
	8	So it's (H)
	9	it's spelled <SPELLING> #S #Í O,
	10	B H R A. <SPELLING>
	11	so it's a difficult spelling even,
	12	(H) in Ireland so in a way,
	13	em,
	14	it's very much part of my identity.
	15	(Hx) em,
	16	in th–
	17	In that sense,

(Síobhra, Personal Interview, February 6, 2024)

Here, not only does Síobhra link her Irish name to a piece of her identity, she also links the particular spelling – understood as a 'difficult' spelling – to this identity as well. Specifically, the intonation unit (IU) break between lines 9 and 10 calls attention specifically to the 'bh' in the Irish orthography, which is likely understood as the 'tricky part' ('bh' is often pronounced [v ~ ɣ]).

The perception of Irish as a significantly difficult language became problematic particularly post-1900. Cart-owners, who were required to display their name on their cart, during this time began using their Irish names. As a result, "a number of these were served

with summonses by the Royal Irish Constabulary for allegedly having 'illegible' names on their carts" (Mac Mathúna, 2006: 73). The ideology that the Irish language is somehow more complex or difficult than English is not unique to Irish names alone; we will return to this same framework in Section 3.1.3, which explores issues of mistranslations and misspellings in signage. Ultimately, the difficult language ideology serves to validate the English language's higher place within the linguistic hierarchy and stigmatize the use of the Irish language in general.

Lucas, whose first and last names are not noticeably Irish in origin, noted in our interview that people would often ask where he was from, assuming he was an immigrant or tourist. Lucas reflected that sometimes this makes him feel "less Irish" while simultaneously connecting him to his Romanian heritage, considering that his surname is "as Romanian as it gets" (Lucas, Personal Interview, November 19, 2023). Here, Lucas reveals how names can be ideologically linked to ethnicity and nationality; while his surname connects him to his Romanian heritage, it also contradicts the assumptions that 'Irish name = Irish' and 'Non-Irish name = Not Irish' (see Fig. 2 line 2). This can apply not only to Irish and non-Irish, but also to anglicized and non-anglicized names. For example, the image provided in Figure 3 links Catholic and Protestant identities[3] to two different versions of a place name.

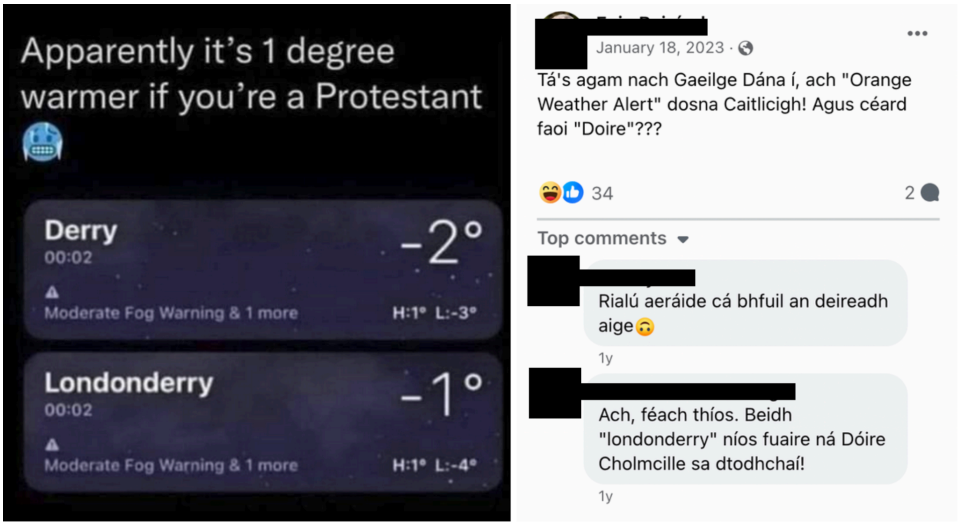

Figure 3: *Screenshot from Gaeilge Dána Facebook Group*

Note. The screenshot was taken by the author on April 2, 2024. From anonymized Facebook user (2023).

Here, if one associates the place with the name "Derry" (which, although still an anglicization, is more closely tied to the Irish language version, *Doire*), they are assumed to

[3] The terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' have been used to describe two ethno-national groups (Irish and British) particularly during the Troubles as there are many complex indexicalities between religion and ethno-national politics (see Section 1.3).

be Catholic, while use of the name "Londonderry" is reserved for Protestants. The importance of place names in particular is discussed further throughout Section 3, and we will return specifically to the importance of Derry in Section 3.1.2. This leads us into our discussion of language ideologies that concern Irish national and ethnic identities beyond names.

2.2 *Tír gan teanga tír gan anam*: Language, Ethnicity, and Nationality

When it comes to understanding larger collective identities, people tend to turn to aspects of culture that they experience as unique in order to distinguish them from other groups. One such cultural component is language. Since language is inherently rooted in social interaction, and culture is understood as the unique ways in which individuals experience and celebrate within a certain social group, the ways in which certain social or cultural groups use language is often considered as both inseparable from and iconic to any other cultural practices; this ideology states that a distinct cultural identity is defined by the way in which participants uniquely use language (i.e. 'language=culture'). In the 18th century, when the concept of nation-states and nationality gained immense power on the global stage, this ideology became a powerful symbolic political tool for nation building. 'Nation' here is understood using Anderson (1991: 6): "it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign", and 'imagined' is further understood as an ideologically constructed reality. In order to justify the particular limitations of the nation, it follows that cultural differentiation – and therefore certain linguistic boundaries – can be understood as formations of the imagined community of the nation, and thus provide justifications for the national border. Indeed it was during the 18th century that the British in Ireland began to strictly enforce cultural anglicization efforts in attempts to erase a distinctive Irish culture. Just as Jaffe (2009: 393) shows for French and Corsican, dominant colonizer ideologies perpetuating an iconic relationship between language and citizenship (understood here as national identity) portended that opposition to English was therefore an opposition to English-ness. If unique Irish culture was allowed to thrive separately from English culture, this threatened English rule since the distinct Irish culture maintains the possibility to gain ideological legitimacy as a separate national culture and thus ignite Irish nationalism (nationalism here being defined using Barbour (2000: 5) as: “a movement to defend the interests of a nation, to defend or secure its political independence”).

It is important to note that the partition of Ireland (see Section 1.3) remains an immense issue for the ideologically understood Irish community; the enforced political border between the North and South do not always align with the ideological borders of the Irish nation. Thus, the 'language=nation' ideology has emerged along two distinct trajectories; since the partition of Ireland in 1920, "Irish national identity has been fractured, simultaneously post-colonial (in the Republic of Ireland) yet still under British colonial

occupation (in the North), leading to different ways of 'doing' national identity" (hÍr and Strange 2021: 469). Therefore, for our purposes, Irish nationality in this section is not necessarily limited to citizenship in the Republic of Ireland, but rather inclusive of all versions of an ideological Irish nation.

Figure 4 provides a visualization of how the two main ideologies (line 1) link language to nationhood (line 2), and thus form the ideological connection between English nationality and the English language, as well as between Irish nationality and the Irish language (line 3). This section primarily focuses on online discourse data gathered from Reddit and X (Twitter) that builds off of the connections between names and language introduced through Órla, Síobhra, and Lucas in the previous section.

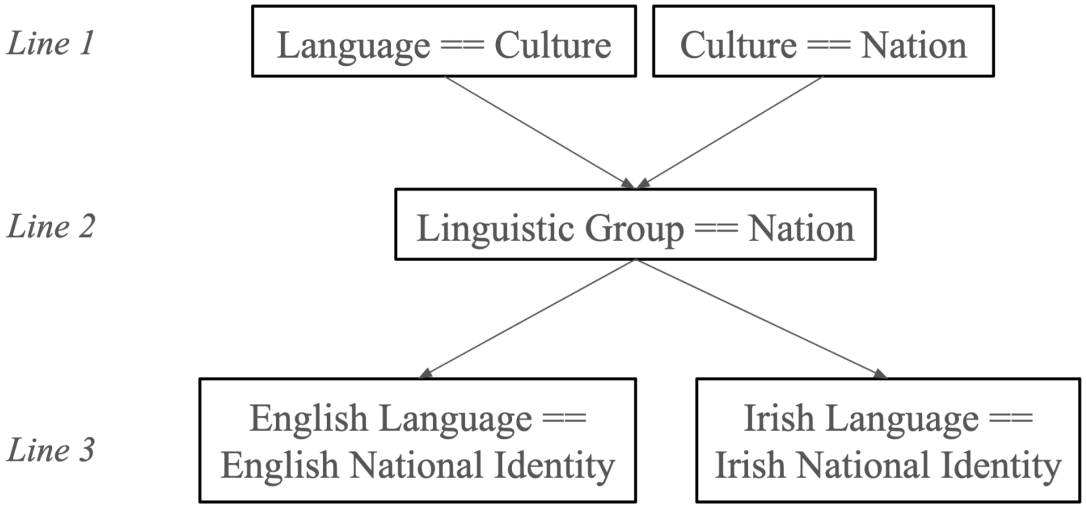

Figure 4: *Ideological Frameworks: Language and National Identity*

Just as the 'language=nationality' ideology was manipulated through anglicization to serve English nationalism, it has also served to justify the Irish struggle for independence (see Section 1.3), and continues to be a significant factor for Irish national identity in both the North and South. Despite the relative lack of Irish language speakers, the symbolic importance of Irish as a 'national language' is especially evident through efforts to officially recognize the language in the political domain. In the Constitution of the Irish Free State (1922), Irish was declared the national language, with English still being "equally recognized as an official language" (Article 4), but it wasn't until 2022 in the Identity and Language Act (Northern Ireland) that Irish became an official language in the North (Northern Ireland legislation, 2022). The importance of language for national identity extends beyond just these political bodies; for example, the responses of two users to a question about how Irish people "truly feel about English" in a r/ireland Reddit thread link the Irish language directly to a national identity (Figure 5 and 6).

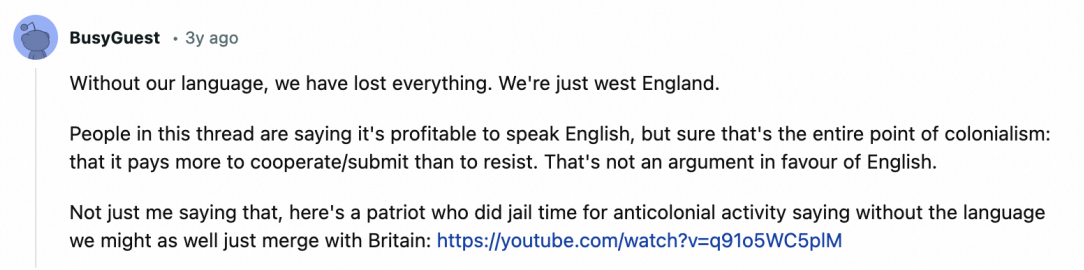

Figure 5: *Comment in r/ireland subreddit from @ChinggisHan (2021)*
Note. The screenshot was taken by the author on January 30, 2024. From @BusyGuest (2021).

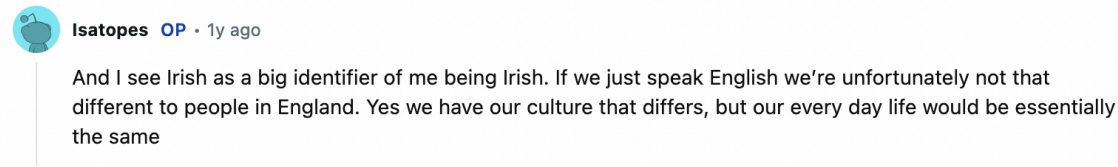

Figure 6: *Comment in r/ireland from @Isatopes (2022)*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on January 30, 2024. From a post in r/ireland from @Isotopes (2022).

Each of the comments in the figures above show a similar ideological framework that equates language to national cultural identity. This is linked to both Irish and English here: these users imply that by speaking English, they must therefore be the same as the English peoples. It follows that the only way to create a distinguishable Irish identity is to speak the Irish language. Within this understanding, the first commenter draws a daunting conclusion: if language is the only difference separating Irish and English nationality, then the loss of the Irish language means the loss of Irish national identity as a whole, making Ireland "just west England." In this way, this user understands language as a key component in a sense of national legitimacy; in this framework, Ireland cannot be considered a legitimate independent nation without its own language. Figure 7 provides another powerful example of the historic perpetuation of this framework by the Gaelic League in order to garner support for the language as a symbol of Irish national pride and power against the English in the early 1900s.

Figure 7: *1913 Gaelic League Poster: Éire vs. West Britain*
Note. From Frances Georgiana Chenevix Trench (1913). Public Domain.

Responding to an X post from a Belfast news provider on proposals for dual-language signage, the comment in Figure 8 similarly draws on the rhetoric from the War for Independence. The comment begins with a well-known Irish language quote from Pádraig Pearce – a writer and teacher who was executed and martyred for his involvement in Easter Rising: "*Tír gan teanga, tír gan anam* ['A country without a language is a country without a soul']" (translation by author). This phrase is a powerful embodiment of the ideological connection between language – here understood as the indigenous language of the land – and country, extending the need for linguistic identity beyond political validation into a cultural and spiritual importance.

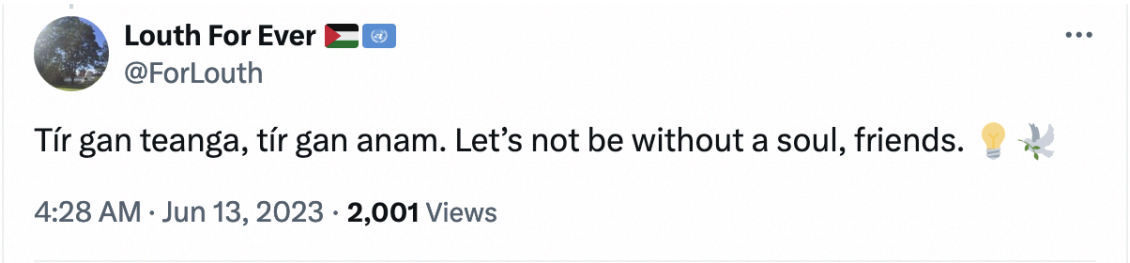

Figure 8: *Comment from @ForLouth (2023)*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on February 25, 2024. From a post in response to @BelTel [Belfast Telegraph] (2023).

While it is clear that these comments uphold *Gaeilge* as the language to validate Ireland, another response to the r/ireland thread challenges the implication that Irish is the only legitimate linguistic difference that can distinguish nationality (Figure 9).

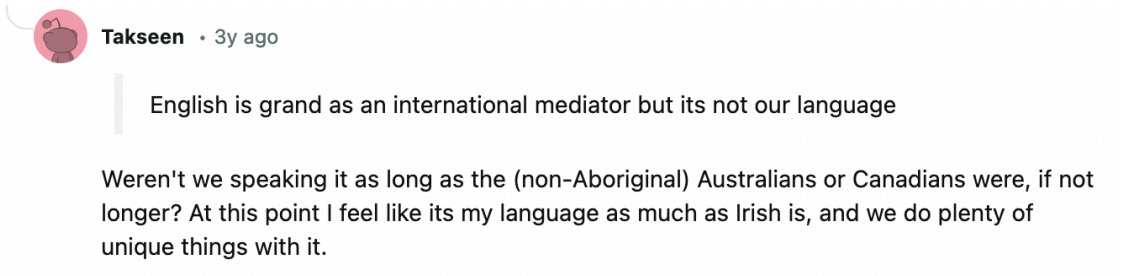

Figure 9: *Comment in r/ireland from @Takseen (2021).*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on January 30, 2024. From a post in r/ireland from @ChinggisHan (2021).

While this user acknowledges a feeling of ownership over Irish, they also acknowledge a feeling of ownership over the unique ways that Irish people use English. While this likely refers to the various Irish dialects of English (called Hiberno-English), the user could also be referring to the rich literary traditions in Ireland that primarily use English (e.g. James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney…etc.). Either way, the user places themself along a different ideological trajectory; unique language use is still significant to national identity, however it is not limited to a strict English vs. Irish dichotomy. Instead, any sort of significant historical linguistic difference (such as Hiberno-English dialects or unique literary styles) can provide validation for national identity. These conflicting attitudes are not uncommon throughout language ideologies; speakers of related language varieties may consider that they speak different dialects of the same language if they share an ethnic or national identity, or that they speak completely separate languages if they do not share these identities (Barbour 2000; 12). While Hiberno-English may be outwardly considered a dialectal variety of English, for some Irish individuals it provides sufficient differentiation from other English varieties both because of its historical footprint, and because of its distinctly Irish form.

Just as we have seen how language can provide a nation a certain sense of legitimacy, ethnicity has also been a way to provide that validation; indeed, because of the need to justify national borders in order to secure political independence, "there is a strong political pressure on ethnic groups to redefine themselves as nations" (Barbour 2000; 8). Because they are so often ideologically linked, it is helpful to provide an explanation of the key differences between nationality and ethnicity. The nation here is defined as an ideologically constructed, contained community (Anderson 1991: 6). Ethnicity is attributed to a shared or common ancestry which may include certain cultural elements such as language or traditional customs. These cultural elements from ethnic communities can become a vibrant aspect of

the imagined national community, making way for issues of ethnonationalism, which is the ideology that ethnic identity is a vital component of national identity. For those individuals who identify with an Irish national or cultural identity, but may not identify with an Irish ethnicity, cultural components such as language can help express that identity. For example, in a personal interview, Limerick-based musician Denise Chaila explains how she began learning Irish in order to underline her Irish identity, which was often challenged because of her race,[4] which comes from her Zambian heritage:

> I started learning Irish out of spite, not out of love [...] I would travel and white American tourists would find me in pubs, and they would tryta erase my Irishness. It's this weird pissing contest back and forth [...] 'No, I'm more Irish than you, I'm white!' Which is what it always boiled down to, you know? And so, I started to look for these accouterments of culture to hold on to. Things that I could do, or be, or behave in ways that wouldn't just be like: 'Gosh, how is that Irish?'" (Chailia in Rollefson et al. 2023: 444)

Chaila's experience highlights the significance and impact that ethnonational ideologies can have such as the ideological index between whiteness and Irishness. In the racist and exclusionary framework of these white American tourists, as a result of a perceived non-Irish ethnicity, Chaila's Irish cultural and national identity was not only called into question, but qualified as 'less' Irish than a white Irish American. In order to challenge that, Chaila found that the Irish language was an "accoutrement of culture to hold onto" in order to express and enact her Irishness in a way that others would not be able to "erase" or overlook. In this way, Irish as a marker of Irishness can be a positive way of identity expression, however, this same framework can be used to undermine the Irishness of those who do not speak the language. For example, the argument on X shown in Figure 10 is immensely charged as the user labeled [B] claims that their knowledge of Irish makes them 'more' Irish than the user labeled [A] – an Irish individual.

[4] Note that 'race' is understood as separate from 'ethnicity'; ethnicity here refers to heritage, while race is understood as the socially created categories of people based on physical traits such as skin color or hair texture.

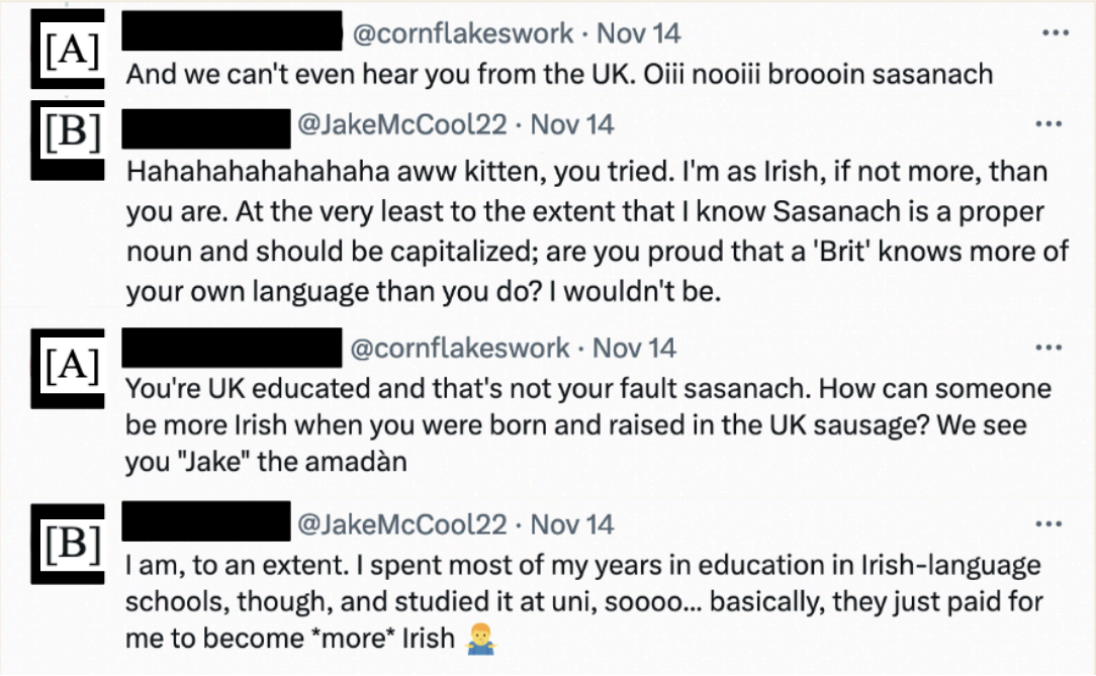

Figure 10: *Argument on X between @cornflakeswork and @JakeMcCool22 (2023)*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on November 20, 2023. From Irish Jewish Voice [@Irishchutzpah] (2023).

This interaction in particular is especially charged due to the already fraught relationship between Ireland and the UK (see Section 1.3). The first comment from user A was made in response to user B's original negative reply to a controversial post concerning Irish politicians on Palestine from an X account called Irish Jewish Voice (2023).[5] By saying they "can't even hear [user B] from the UK", user A attempts to disregard user B's pro-Israel comment as a result of their connection to the UK and their identity as a "sasanach," or an 'Englishman'. In response, user B insists that they are "as Irish, if not more" as a direct result of their linguistic knowledge of the Irish language, claiming that going to "Irish-language schools" (*Gaeilscoileanna*) and studying the language at university makes one "*more* Irish". When considered alongside pervading attitudes about the quality of Irish language education (see Section 4), as well as attitudes about the version of Irish that is taught, this claim can become quite ironic; many people operate within a framework allowing legitimacy and authenticity only to certain ways of speaking Irish that are not fostered through schools (see section 2.3).

The disconnect between the perceived importance of the Irish language to Irish national identity and the actual linguistic ability of Irish citizens does not go unnoticed on a larger scale; writer and director Daniel O'Hara satirizes the separation in his short film "Yu

[5] There has long been a strong sense of Irish solidarity with Palestine (Arar, 2017), and we will return to this notion as it relates to the Irish language in Section 3.1.2

Ming Is Ainm Dom ['My name is Yu Ming]" (2003). The short follows a young Chinese man who learns Irish before moving to Ireland, and ends up quite confused. Not only do people not understand Yu Ming, but they do not even recognize the language itself, assuming that he is speaking Chinese. After finally running into a man in a pub who understands, Yu Ming is told that "*Tá Gaeilge níos fearr agat ná mar atá ag formhór na ndaoine sa tír seo* ['You have better Irish than most people in this country']". The irony of the film rests on the assumption that Yu Ming speaks Chinese because of his Chinese ethnicity coming from ethnically Irish individuals who do not speak or understand the Irish language. The film was shortlisted for an Academy Award and has won various other awards, including Best Comedy at the Aspen Shortsfest in 2004, and Best Irish Language Production at the IFTAs in 2004 (filmbase, 2011).

2.3 'Not my Irish': Controversies About Linguistic Legitimacy

As we have seen in the previous subsections, the value of a language can be ideologically connected to its relationship with a certain community. On the national level, this can provide justification for political and social barriers between different linguistic territories (Section 2.2). Within the national consciousness, however, the Irish language is often ideologically placed in the predominantly rural areas where, in theory, Irish is still the primary community language – the *Gaeltachtí.* This can reinforce linguistic barriers that revitalization and reclamation efforts are simultaneously hoping to break down (Leonard, 2012). This section explores how the underlying 'language=identity' ideology surfaces alongside an authenticity ideology, which recognizes that the language or speech variety must come 'from somewhere', and links the authenticity of speech to a particular dialect or local accent (Dołowy-Rybińska & Hornsby, 2021: 107). This section draws on online discourse observed on Reddit, as well as the attitudes that surface in articles that users reference as validations of their own ideologies and attitudes. We will also explore how Síobhra understands her experiences in both rural and urban *gaeltachtaí*, and how certain associations understood as negative have impacted both Órla's and Síobhra's relationships with *Gaeilge*.

In Ireland, the authenticity ideology becomes apparent in attitudes about *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil* (the official standardized Irish) and rural Gaeltacht dialects of Irish; the language has been "strongly associated with the perceived rural, traditional lifestyle of those regions where it remains the everyday community language" (hÍr and Strange 2021: 466). This association is projected into issues of both language and speaker legitimacy; for example, replying in a thread about language education, one Reddit user explains what counts as 'real' Irish to them (Figure 11).

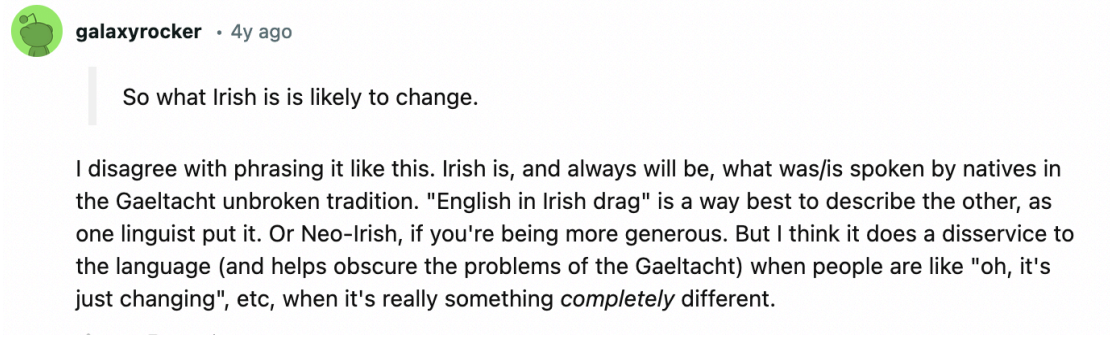

Figure 11: *Comment in r/linguistics from @galaxyrocker (2020)*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on April 2, 2024. From a post in r/linguistics from @q203 (2020).

By claiming that "it's something *completely* different", the user qualifies "Neo-Irish" (understood here as the versions of Irish spoken outside the Gaeltacht) as illegitimate versions of Irish. Noticeably, the Reddit user claims that the language of the Gaeltacht is an "unbroken tradition", revealing the assumption that these regions are somehow 'untouched' by any sort of wider cultural or linguistic changes. This phrase also illustrates an understanding of language as equivalent to tradition, reminiscent of Corkery's claim that "to say tradition is to say language" (Corkery, 1968:14), which can be problematic to efforts for revitalization. Indeed this user explicitly outlines an overarching framework that limits 'authentic' language and 'legitimate' speakers to the "natives in the Gaeltacht", refusing space for second language learners as well as the possibility for native speakers outside these regions.

Not only does the user here attach legitimacy to certain varieties, but they also exhibit a value judgment on them by their use of the phrase "English in Irish drag". This phrase was coined by Feargal Ó Béarra in his paper “Late Modern Irish and the Dynamics of Language Change and Language Death” (2007). Béarra argues that a knowledge of English is 'required' to understand what he calls “Non-Traditional Late Modern Irish,” because of the “unnatural influence of English phonology and syntax on the contemporary language,” and therefore that “much of contemporary Irish is really nothing more than an imitation of English” (Béarra 2007: 262). He uses a celebrated queer art form that is intentionally gender coded – drag – in order to imply a sense of illegitimacy in the identity of this variety of language, thus expressing a homophobic and transphobic negative value judgment on this form of Irish. He then proceeds to blame media and journalists, as well as second language learners in general, all of whom he labels as “the main offenders” for what he understands is a negative linguistic change (Béarra 2007: 262). Figure 12 provides an illustration of the rural Gaeltacht authenticity framework, stemming from the overarching 'tradition=culture' ideology (line 1), then combining a sense of Irish tradition with the perceived 'untouched' areas of the Gaeltacht (line 2), and ultimately leading back to a sense of 'language=culture' surfacing in a 'tradition=language' and 'Gaeltacht=tradition' framework (lines 3 and 4).

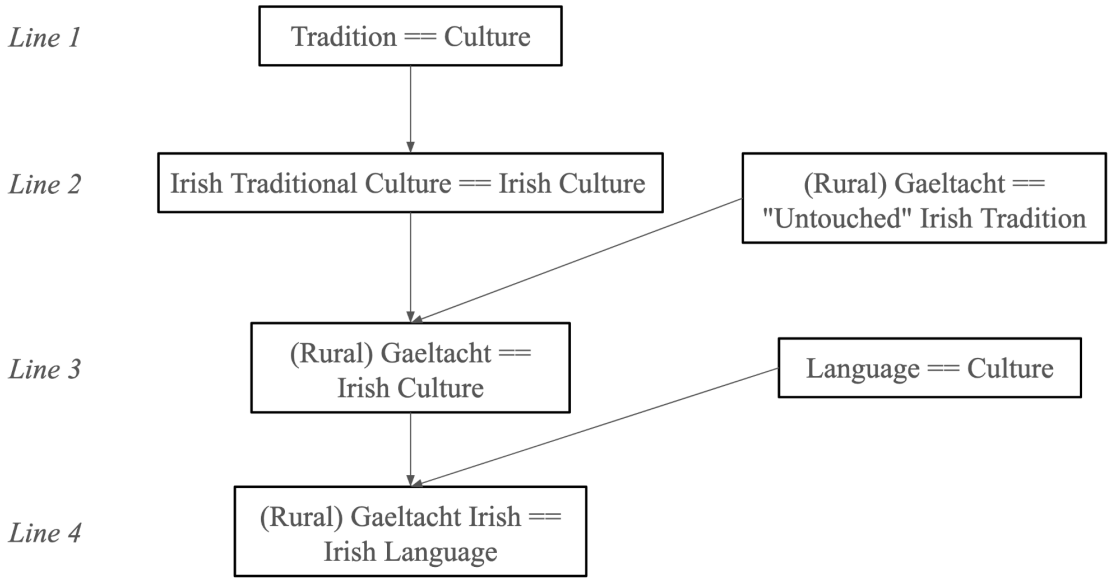

Figure 12: *Ideological Frameworks: Rural Gaeltacht and Irish Language Authenticity*

Alongside the authenticity ideology rooted in the stereotypically rural and perceived traditional experience, a stereotypically urban experience can also bring ideological value to particular speech varieties (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021: 468). In recent years, there have been emerging Irish-speaking communities outside the traditionally known *Gaeltachtí,* including West Belfast, Loughrea, Carn Tóchair, Ennis, and Clondalkin Village. Although effectively urban *gaeltachtí,* they are officially designated as *Líonraí Gaeilge* ('Irish-language networks'). Because of the deeply rooted indexicalities between the language and a perceived traditional, rural lifestyle, as well as the negative attitudes towards how Irish is taught in schools, attitudes towards urban speech varieties can be similarly harsh. For example, in an article posted under r/gaeilge on Reddit (@Have_only_my_dreams, 2017), one author uses words such as "compromised", and "degradation" throughout their writing (Creeth, 2015). Operating through an understanding that assumes monolingualism is more natural, they question the "richness and capabilities of the language in a grafted, urban environment" (Creeth, 2015). The word "grafted" here illustrates the depth of the belief that the language is natural only to a rural environment.

This attitude can be harmful not only to those deemed illegitimate speakers, but to the rural *Gaeltacht* community as well. Because urban areas are often ideologically understood as more 'modern', by limiting Irish to the rural landscape, the language itself can take on an antiquated connotation that can surface in negative attitudes of usefulness. Additionally, the rural landscape is often associated with lower classes, and indeed the language itself has been associated with poverty, attaching a stigma to the language that affects revitalization and reclamation efforts. Both Órla and Síobhra brought up experiences with these stigmas:

ÓRLA; 1 My school did not
2 Promote the Irish language.
3 At all.
4 um,
5 ######.
6 They um,
7 It was.
8 Very much:
9 ahm,
10 A fossil.
11 Of a time gone by.

(Órla, Personal Interview, January 4, 2024)

SÍOBHRA; 1 I think that there's a definitely. (Hx)
2 A sense of crisis?
3 In-in th-the west of Ireland
4 Because people
5 Kinda see that [sense of stigma].
6 Um,
7 And then it manifests,
8 In students through.
9 (H) um,
10 A lack of confidence.

(Síobhra, Personal Interview, February 6, 2024)

In contrast, the symbolic value of urban experience as a modern experience has been a valuable tool for language learning motivation in Ireland. For example, in their bilingual and controversial rap, the Belfast group, KNEECAP, attempt to modernize the indexicalities of the Irish language while simultaneously "maintaining the strong association between the language, Irish national identity and Republicanism" (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021: 468). In their study of the group, Ó hÍr and Strange (2021) argue that by combining traditional elements of a nationalist ideology with taboo subjects seemingly at odds with it, "Kneecap challenge the language's naturalized association with some 'pure', traditional and rural Irishness, instead grounding it in the everyday realities of urban, working-class (Northern) Irish life in the twenty-first century" (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021: 467). Síobhra, who has been part of both rural and urban gaeltacht communities, explained how the urban environment has provided a confidence and hope for Irish in Belfast:

SÍOBHRA; 1 There's much more (Hx)
2 Of a confidence
3 In Belfast
4 Around the Irish language
5 Which is really lacking?
6 In places like Galway.

(Síobhra, Personal Interview, February 6, 2024)

SÍOBHRA; 1 It's all–
2 It's so positive [in the urban Gaeltacht]
3 You're seeing growth,
4 You're seeing positivity.
5 You're seeing.
6 Um, (Hx)
7 Crowded events,
8 (H) You're seeing progress all the time.

(Síobhra, Personal Interview, February 6, 2024)

By creating new and visible spaces for the Irish language, the *Líonraí Gaeilge* can be considered a massive achievement for Irish language revitalization. Without a standard, these new speaker communities likely would not have been possible. Therefore, if there is to be hope for the future of Irish language revitalization projects, there needs to be a more nuanced criticism of *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil* that recognizes the importance of learning regional dialects for language maintenance as well as the legitimacy and importance for second language learners with the standard variety for language revitalization, as suggested following a study of language vitality in a gaeltacht region from Ó hÍfearnáin (2008).

3 *Éire* Speaks: Linguistic Landscapes and the Land

The linguistic landscape of Ireland offers a space to perform language ideologies in a very impactful way. Just as we have seen for interpersonal identities in Section 2, this section explores how the identity of place – both perceived and symbolic – can be indexed through the language that is present in its environment. After defining 'linguistic landscape' in general terms, this chapter will dive into the linguistic landscape of Ireland, particularly focusing on how language ideologies impact its symbolic and functional uses (Section 3.1). In this section we will hear from Lucas and Síobhra about their experiences with Irish in Dublin (3.1.1), dive into the importance of language and symbolism in the North with Órla (3.1.2), explore a Facebook group dedicated to finding misspellings and mistranslations in the Irish that appears on signs (3.1.3), and discover the significance of font for projecting a sense of 'authenticity' in tourist spaces (3.1.4). Then, we will turn to the significance of the indigenous Irish landscape as it can be understood through the language; in this section we will hear from Síobhra about the power of language to connect and build respect for the environment (3.2).

Linguistic Landscapes (LL)

The specific linguistic landscape (LL) of a given territory is formed by the language that appears in a particular environment (Landry & Bourhis 1997; Barni & Bagna 2010). In

other words, it is made up of that language that surrounds a person as they are present in a particular area. This can include both public and private signage, as well as the language of place names or written in public art such as graffiti. Linguists have recently expanded this definition to include the aural use of language in the surrounding space such as overheard conversations or public announcements such as those at a train station or on a bus (Scarvaglieri et. al.; 2013). There is a vital distinction between what has been called 'top-down' (produced by certain authorities) and 'bottom-up' (produced by individuals or private businesses) forms that appear in the linguistic landscapes (Ben-Rafael et al.; 2006).

Linguistic landscapes are often indicators of borders between language communities. This is true both within and between states. Indeed, language planning efforts specifically dealing with the linguistic landscape have helped to manage conflicts between language communities in multilingual states, and as of 1997, more than 30 countries as well as both sovereign and non-sovereign states had passed laws directly regulating the language used on public signage (Landry & Bourhis 1997: 24).[6] As a result, Landry and Bourhis presume that "the linguistic landscape may be the most visible marker of the linguistic vitality of the various ethnolinguistic groups living within a particular administrative or territorial enclave" (Landry & Bourhis 1997: 34). This was a big line of inquiry in LL studies, although it has since expanded following Barni and Bagna's demonstration that "there is no direct relationship between the visibility of a language in an area and its vitality" (Barni & Bagna 2010: 10). Linguistic landscapes are dependent on both linguistic and extralinguistic factors (i.e. the language must have a written form to appear on signs), including diverse uses of signs to showcase political, economic, or social power. While much signage and public announcements are limited due to the importance of their informational function, in multilingual states with significant minority language communities – particularly when these communities are majority bilingual with a dominant language such as English – the importance of the linguistic landscape's symbolic ability is a significant and controversial factor.

3.1 Who (or what) is Irish for?; Examining the Irish LL

When navigating the linguistic landscape (LL) of Ireland, it becomes evident that the Irish language is often portrayed not as a 'useful' or practical tool for communication, but primarily as a powerful symbol of culture, heritage, and identity. This section delves into the multifaceted relationship between the Irish language and its representation within the linguistic landscapes of both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The first two subsections focus on the unique issues with the Irish language in the linguistic landscapes of the Republic (3.1.1) and of Northern Ireland (3.1.2). Section 3.1.3 will shed light on the notion of 'language abuse' on street signs throughout Ireland – that is, issues of

[6] Note that this number is from 1997 and is likely much larger today.

mistranslation, misspelling, and vandalization that appear in the Irish linguistic landscape. Finally, the last section will explore the ways in which the Irish language is commodified through certain orthographic choices that perpetuate a perceived ‘authentic’ Irishness. Through this exploration, we aim to unravel the complexities surrounding the attitudes towards the Irish language within contemporary society, shedding light on how ideologies about identity can serve a significant symbolic significance that can be either helpful or hurtful to language revitalization or reclamation depending on particular attitudes concerning the language's practical implications.

3.1.1 Irish LL in the Republic: 'Irish first, but English more'

Despite a strong presence of Irish in the LL of the Republic, only 1.24% of people in the South have reported using Irish on a daily basis (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2023). Indeed, after attending both a *Naíorna* (Irish medium preschool) and a *Gaelscoil* (Irish medium primary school), it wasn't until her family briefly moved to Dublin when she was about seven that Síobhra began to realize that she was in a minority as a bilingual Irish speaker:

SÍOBHRA;
I think when I was about.
Seven, (Hx)
When I realized that people didn't speak Irish–
That not everyone spoke, (Hx)
More than one language.
I think I got a bit of a shock.
(H) because it was just so normalized around me.
That you had,
Both English and Irish.
(H) Um,
And that was when,
We lived in Dublin.
So I was in the city center.

(Síobhra, Personal Interview, February 6, 2024)

Throughout Dublin, 'top-down' language work (produced by certain authorities) includes both the Irish and English languages, however, there is a significant lack of equitable representation between the two languages on state signage. In the Official Languages Act of 2003, which strives to "ensure that any services that are not provided by the body through the medium of the Irish language will be so provided" (Section 11, 1b), special care in Section 9 outlined the importance of the prominence of Irish in the LL. However, following a regulation added in 2008, these regulations did *not* apply to either road signs or signs regarding "safety, health, and welfare at work" (Section 3, 3). Although Irish appears on these signs, Conradh na Gaeilge notes, "the text in Irish on the majority of road signs in

Ireland is smaller, in italics, less visible and / or less legible than the English" (Conradh na Gaeilge, n.d.). Figures 13 and 14 show examples of the differences between the Irish as used in street signs vs. as it is used in other forms of public signage, respectively.

Figure 13: *Linguistic Landscapes: Dublin Street Signs*
Note. Photos by author in 2022

Figure 14: *Linguistic Landscapes: Dublin Pedestrian Public Signage*
Note. Photos by author in 2022.

There are multiple iconographic aspects at play in the formatting of the signs shown in both figures. Firstly, it is significant that the Irish appears above the English; however, it is evident from the differences between road and non-road signs that this is more symbolic than informational. In the street signs the English is not only slightly larger, but written in capital letters, directly calling a viewer's attention to its importance. On the other hand, the Irish is italicized and slightly smaller. When placed next to each other, despite the Irish appearing above the English, because the italics are competing with non-italicized capital letters, the viewer is immediately drawn to the English phrase first. This shows a clear inequality

between the languages as the state implies that the English would be more important for drivers to notice first, in other words, that English is more 'useful'. As argued by *Conradh na Gaeilge*, "this inequality suggests that the first official language of the State has a lower status than English" (Conradh na Gaeilge, n.d.). These road signs show the symbolic importance of Irish to the state, but also explicitly outline a negative view on the language's usefulness. Indeed attitudes surrounding the perceived usefulness of the Irish language tend to be quite negative in the Republic, leaning into a 'dead language' framework. For example, Lucas claims that there is "no real benefit" to learning Irish because "no one speaks it anyways":

> "No real benefit, I think less than 1% of the population can speak it fluently, quite honestly it's a dead language, you're just learning it culturally [...] There's no benefit to learning the language if the only culture that speaks it no one knows how to speak it anyways"
>
> *(Lucas, Personal Interview, November 19, 2023)*

Thus, within this attitude the symbolic and cultural use of the language does not provide a perceived 'benefit' to the everyday person. Instead, Lucas claims that "you're just learning it culturally"; here, Lucas acknowledges the significance of learning a language purely from a cultural perspective, as it allows individuals to deeply engage with the heritage, traditions, and values associated with that language. Here, Lucas doesn't perceive the language as practically useful in contemporary society. In a globalized world where communication across borders is increasingly important, languages are often valued for their instrumental benefits – such as supporting business needs, getting a job, or engaging with an international community. Simultaneously, Lucas also perceives the importance of the language to culture:

> "No one that I know my age thinks it's a waste of time, people value the culture and the language but when you're a kid getting by in school it's 'bla bla bla' [...] When I was young I took [learning Irish] for granted. I didn't care. But in hindsight I wish I did [...because] when you're older you value and cherish the language 'cos it's your culture"
>
> *(Lucas, Personal Interview, November 19, 2023)*

This quote reflects a realization of the practical usefulness of language in preserving cultural identity, fostering connections within communities, and navigating various aspects of life. However, at the same time Lucas suggests that the immediate utility of language is negligible because "the only culture that speaks it no one knows how to speak it anyways". Despite acknowledging the cultural significance of the language, Lucas expresses prevailing negative attitudes towards its perceived usefulness in contemporary society. Thus, while the Irish language can serve as a symbol of cultural heritage and identity, societal perceptions often overlook its practical value, reflected in the complex treatment of the languages in the road signs. This inequity, enacted by the state, emphasizes the symbolic importance of language to

national identity while implicitly denigrating its practical utility. Indeed, individuals often comment on the importance of the government's role in changing these perceptions of the language's usefulness. For example, Figure 15 shows a conversation thread posted in response to a question on the subreddit r/linguistics. The question asks specifically about the abilities of the Irish education system (we will return to the significance of this education context in Section 4 on education).

Figure 15: *Perceptions of Usefulness from @lskjempe (2020)*
Note. Screenshot from author on November 24, 2023. From post in r/linguistics from @q203 (2020).

The first comment in Figure 15 notes a critique of political priorities concerning the language. As we have seen with signage, the symbolic importance of the language is indeed prevalent, however this symbolism does not reflect an understanding of a functioning informational use of the language. This user also reveals their own understanding of the language's use; by saying that politicians need to "make it something useful", they imply that the language as it currently stands is not useful. In response, the second commenter expresses their reluctant agreement, claiming that Irish is often used as a "showpiece" for politicians to gain voters. In the final comment, the user further emphasizes this point, claiming the language is "nothing more than a political football and nationalistic heritage showpiece". These users express a negative attitude that Irish is considered "useless" except for its symbolic and political functions. This attitude is taken a step further into a rather extreme rhetoric in one man's complaint about bus and train announcements in Dublin (shown in Figure 16).

Figure 16: *Image post from @Seanfhear59 (2024).*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on April 26, 2024. From @Seanfhear59 (2024).

Notably, all announcements in Dublin as well as many ads and signs in public transportation spaces are provided in *both* English and Irish. By describing only the Irish language as having "assaulted" his eyes and ears and as being "very invasive", he associates an extremely negative experience with one language over another in the same environment and format. However, it seems clear that his underlying issue rests mainly with the government, claiming that what he calls "Irish language propaganda" is reminiscent of a "totalitarian state". Hyland often writes very radically anti-Irish language letters to various news sources, including one titled "Non Irish speakers here in the Republic face fresh discrimination under new language law" (Hyland, 2022). Indeed, while his opinions are quite extreme, he highlights a prominent – albeit bigoted – understanding of government supported language reclamation and revitalization work.

In response to the post in Figure 16, many users commented on Hyland's Irishness (Figure 17), associating a love or appreciation for the Irish language with an Irish identity. For example, user A writes "The only part of John that's Irish is the misery", user B describes Killiney (where Hyland allegedly lives) as a place "to live amongst the non Irish", and user C claims that Hyland must be a "West brit or a Northern hun":

Figure 17: *Comments in response to X post from Figure 16.*
Note. This screenshot was compiled from three screenshots taken by the author on April 26, 2024. From @Seanfhear59 (2024).

Each of these examples show how Hyland's extremely negative attitude towards the Irish language is viewed as "non Irish"; thus, while those who have negative perceptions of the language's usefulness, but positive associations with the language's importance exhibited through attitudes of disappointment at the language's decline (such as Lucas or some of the users in Figure 15), are accepted – but those who disapprove of any use of Irish in their vicinity are disregarded.

Issues with 'top-down' Irish appearing in the LL of the Republic are multifaceted. While acknowledging the importance of the language as a national symbol, "showpiece" or cultural emblem, many dual-language signs in the Republic simultaneously reveal a negative usefulness attitude. This is further revealed by the many instances of misspelling and mistranslation on signage in both the North and South (see Section 3.1.3). It is clear that there are a variety of complex attitudes directly linked to Irish in the LL in the Republic. We turn now to the North, where there are similar divisions in the rhetoric of the North, where language is deeply tied to the complexities of identity politics and sectarian divisions.

3.1.2 Irish LL in the North: Irish Symbolism and Sectarian Divisions

In contrast to the Republic, Irish only recently became an official language in the North in 2022. Following this recognition, there have been significant pushes to include more significant dual-language signage around Belfast. This effort, however, has been met with

weighty conflict. For example, in response to a post made by the Irish News on X, many users jumped at the opportunity to criticize certain aspects of the push for the Irish language to appear in the Belfast LL, while others pointed out media bias and mis-information. Linking to an article titled "Irish sign to be erected in east Belfast street after decision to re-survey residents overturned" (Kenwood, 2024), the Irish News' X account commented "An Irish language sign will be erected in an east Belfast street following a vote by councilors at Belfast City Hall" (Figure 18).

Figure 18: *Post on X from The Irish News [@irish_news] (2024).*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on April 26, 2024. From The Irish News [@irish_news] (2024).

Many people responded to this post calling out the journalist's blatant misinformation about the signage itself as well as about the policy surrounding the decision. The headline states that the new signage is Irish, but conceals the bilingual aspect of the sign. It also falsely states that the sign is in east Belfast; the neighborhood in question, Knock Eden Park, is located in south Belfast. This distinction is critical. Due to the history of segregation in Belfast (see Section 1.3), the east is known as a much more predominantly Protestant area. By claiming this area is in east Belfast, Kenwood attempts to undermine the significance of the original survey, in which of the 58.03% of people that voted (calculated from data in Kenwood, 2024), a majority were in favor of the new signage. Those who maintain that east

Belfast is majority Protestant, and that Protestants are against Irish language signage, are thus compelled to believe that the original survey is not legitimate, since their perceived majority is not represented in the poll. The comment from user A in Figure 19, for example, claims that the 15% threshold required to erect the sign was not met. It should be noted that this claim would have been accurate if the previous policy that counted non-responses as votes against the signage was still in effect. However, under the new policy, which is much more equitable for minority language rights, it is only those registered votes that are counted in the percentage, and of the registered votes in this poll, those in favor reached nearly 30% (Kenwood, 2024). This comment, as well as the others provided in Figure 19, show a glimpse at the range of negative reactions to the push to include the Irish language in more signs around Belfast.

Figure 19: *Comments responding to post from Figure 18*
Note. This screenshot was compiled from five screenshots all taken by the author on April 26, 2024. From @irish_news [The Irish News] (2024).

In the first three comments shown in Figure 19, the notion of the Irish language's relationship with conflict is certainly present. User C claims that the inclusion of Irish language signage "incites" tension in the community. Likewise, User B claims this signage is used to "intimidate" and divide "territory". Finally, user A implies that there was some kind

of intimidation used to unjustly enact these processes. These users thus perceive the language itself as "inciting" and "intimidating", feeling that the presence of the language is dangerous. This attitude is not unfounded; because of the relatively recent history of political violence in the North (see section 1.3), for many people the Irish language indexes a certain perceived dangerous form of Irish nationalism: in his book concerning *Language, Symbolic Power, and Political violence in Northern Ireland*, Diarmait Mac Giolla Chríost argues:

> "The Irish language can be looked upon as the defining symbolic element of the political violence that has shaped the history of Northern Ireland and, to a great extent, the relationship between the UK and the Republic of Ireland" (Mac Giolla Chríost 2012: 2)

Indeed, the attitude that Irish is dangerous is rooted in an ideology linking the language with Irish Republicanism. In the North, a wave of support for Irish language revival sprung up around the 1970s in West Belfast. Despite a ban on language teaching materials and general use of the Irish language, Republican prisoners fostered Irish language learning communities within the prisons, coining the terms "Jailic" (jail + Gaelic) and "Jailtacht" (jail + Gaeltacht) (Mac Giolla Chríost 2012; 1). These developments provided a strong ideological link between the language and Republican political views.

The comments from users D and E both show negative critiques of the Irish language from a different angle. Rather than being explicitly dangerous or intimidating, these two users are critical of the government's choice to allocate money to this cause rather than what they would presumably consider more important issues. While user D implies that the goal to increase Irish language visibility is ultimately useless, equating the use of government funds for dual-Irish and English signage to "throwing money away", user E specifically raises a different social issue relating to food. This kind of criticism of government spending is common to education discussions that will be explored in Section 4.

Both the dangerous attitude and the negative economic attitude are often present in discussions of Irish in the LL in the North. The examples shown in Figure 21 are taken from a 2022 poll (shown in Figure 20) concerning the Irish language on signs posted in the subreddit r/northernireland. Notably, the poll results are heavily in favor of Irish appearing on signs. Here, user A shows a similar attitude about language and harmfully dividing as those comments from Figure 19 (A-C). Likewise, user B (in Fig. 21) shows similar attitudes pertaining to economic priorities as the comments from users D and E in Figure 19. Similarly to the example in (19A), the commenter in (21C) disregards the accuracy of this poll by claiming that the subreddit is not wholly representative. They also use the term "rebels", a word that adds a certain moral judgment on those with assumed Republican political views.

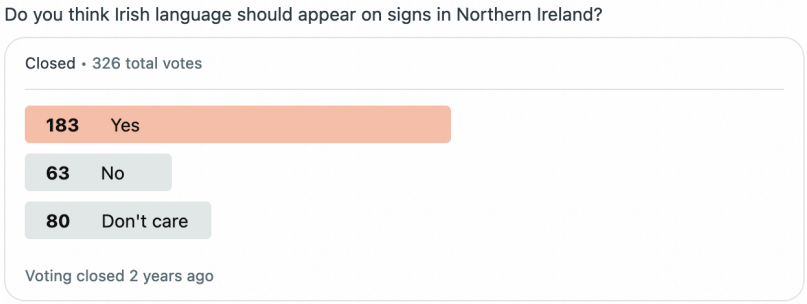

Figure 20: *r/northernireland poll from @-CokeJones- (2022)*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on April 26, 2024. From @-CokeJones- (2022).

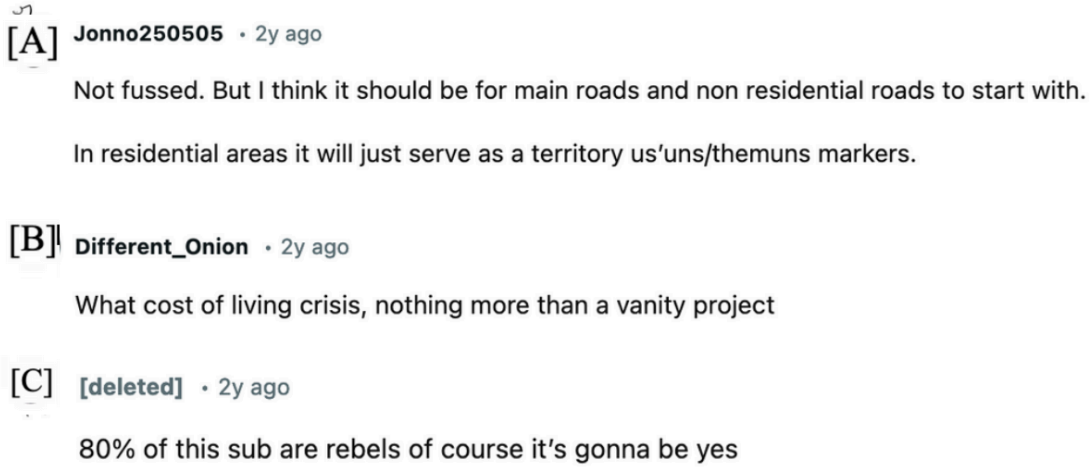

Figure 21: *Comments responding to post from Figure 20*
Note. This screenshot was compiled from three screenshots all taken by the author on April 26, 2024. From @-CokeJones- (2022).

Despite being met with these negative attitudes and responses, street signage that includes the Irish language has been erected in various places around Belfast, although this process has been slow, and the signs are not always accurate (issues around mis-translations are discussed in Section 3.1.3). In our interview, Órla spoke to what these signs, as well as notable Irish language symbolism in the Belfast LL, has meant to her:

ÓRLA;	1	Without,
	2	the likes,
	3	of
	4	the street signage,
	5	and without the–
	6	the priority,
	7	and the sorta,

the-the-the visibility.
of the language.
I think we wo–
we wouldn't be as far on.
as we are now.
(H) um, Even sorta the (Hx)
the symbolism
around the Irish language,
and you'll probably see sorta the red
and white circle.
um to do with the Dream Dearg?
(H) and that has really become synonymous
with,
the movement itself.

(Órla, Personal Interview, January 4, 2024)

After mentioning the importance of street signs for Irish language visibility, Órla notes another key way that symbolism has been vital for language reclamation as propelled by a language rights activist group called An Dream Dearg. The imagery of a white circle on a red background is linked directly to this group, and for many to the Irish language reclamation movement itself. As Órla explains:

ÓRLA; So the ring,
the white ring,
with the red.
So red is dearg.
in Irish.
dearg it's to do with,
sorta the,
emotions of frustration and anger and,
d'ya know all those sorta things that are,
um:,
attached to the movement,
that we are angry.
and we are takin' to the streets.
because,
ya know,
we're …
nearly thirty years on,
from the likes of the Good Friday Agreement.
and the sorta,
th-the legislation that's been put in place,
and we're still waitin'.
ya know?

(H) um,
but the-the
the circle itself is synonymous with the Irish language
because,
when you achieve a certain standard,
of Irish like,
you'll receive a fáinne.
is what we call it.
it's a ring.
[53...71]
it-its of that idea,
Celtic sorta,
symbol.
and that,
ya'know,
it-it's sorta,
i-i-it's never ending.
um,
and that's what is synonymous with the struggle as well.

(Órla, Personal Interview, January 4, 2024)

The Irish word, *fáinne,* means 'ring' or 'circle'. *Fáinne* is likewise the name for a circular pin badge that can be worn to symbolize a person's fluency or willingness to speak in Irish. The silver version, *Fáinne Airgid,* is worn by speakers with a basic or intermediate knowledge of the language, and the gold, *Fáinne Óir,* is worn by fluent speakers. The circle imagery, symbolizing the continuing, never-ending cycles in life, is thus carried into the efforts for language reclamation and revival, and thus is the central feature for An Dream Dearg's logo. The name of the group itself, An Dream Dearg*,* translates to 'the red ones', or 'the red crowd', indexing, as Órla points out, the passion and frustration that many people feel in the loss of their language. While this group participates in many activist movements, An Dream Dearg is centered in language activism and language rights. A large part of this activism is advocating for bilingual signage. Figure 22 shows a recent post from An Dream Dearg on X concerning a multilingual sign in a train station in Belfast.

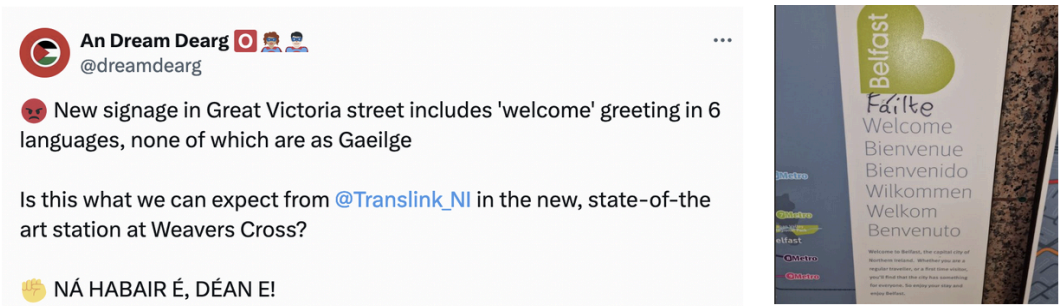

Figure 22: *Post on X from An Dream Dearg [@dreamdearg] (2024).*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on February 25, 2024. From An Dream Dearg [@dreamdearg] (2024).

There is quite a bit of symbolism and language work being done in the post from An Dream Dearg as well as in the photo included of the signage in the Belfast train station. Firstly, the white circle on the red background is prominent in both the account name and profile picture, which also features a Palestinian flag. As part of their fight for language rights, An Dream Dearg proclaims to stand in solidarity with other groups that face oppression: "We believe in rights for all, and recognise the importance and the need for fostering a rights-based society" (An Dream Dearg, n.d.). Significantly, a notable number of X users who exhibit positive attitudes towards the Irish language also feature some sort of public solidarity with the Palestinian people in their profile (additional example in Figure 9). In contrast, there were multiple users that expressed negative language views who showcased Israeli flags (see examples in Figure 19, users C and E). The solidarity between Irish and Palestinian peoples has been quite significant (Arar, 2017), and has been very present particularly in semiotic spaces such as murals and graffiti (Hopper & Renfro, 2022; Rolston, 2009). Following Ivkovic & Lotherington (2008), and Kim & Chesnut (2020), we can view these expressions of solidarity on X as a kind of virtual linguistic and semiotic landscape.

Returning to An Dream Dearg (Figure 22), the X post begins with a red angry face emoji, indexing the frustration and anger that the group often expresses. On the sign itself, there are six 'top-down' languages – that is, there are six languages that are featured in the original design of the translink sign, (English, French, Spanish, German, Dutch, and Italian) each saying 'Welcome'. A photo of this sign is included in the X post, in which the An Dream Dearg account shows their anger that the new signage doesn't include 'welcome' "*as Gaeilge* ['in Irish']". Indeed, the sign does include the Irish, however *fáilte* ('welcome') is added via the 'bottom-up' language work of graffiti. The anger stems from the fact that the Irish was added to a sign which, in this view, should have already included the language. The final statement on the post, written in all capital letters next to an emoji of a raised fist, says "*Ná habair é, déan é* ['Don't say it, do it']". In our interview, Órla expanded on the meaning of this influential language activist phrase in Belfast:

ÓRLA;
So,
people talk a great story.
and people have all these great notions.
and great ideas.
Who actually acts on it?
but that's the sorta,
it's a mantra that has followed,
everything that we do.
d'ya know what I mean,
It's ya know,
what's the point in,
cryin' about it from an armchair.
what's the point in cryin' about it from home,
and if you don't,
take to the streets and actually show that,
y'know,
y-you're wound up about this,
and it's not fair.
and things like that so.

(Órla, Personal Interview, January 4, 2024)

Thus, the addition of the Irish to the signage in the post from Figure 23 can be viewed as an act of protest and resistance against the erasure of the language in the landscape. This kind of bottom-up language policy protest is prevalent in many forms throughout Ireland, and is particularly visible in issues about place names, where it has been common to see English names crossed out or changed. For example, perhaps the most famous place name dispute occurred during the Troubles in a city that is referred to as either Derry (also *Doire* and Free Derry) or Londonderry. Calling to mind the image from Section 2.1 (Figure 3), these two names are ideologically representative of the two distinct ethno-national groups that came up against each other during the Troubles. Following an incursion and brutal rampage into the Bogside area of the city by the predominantly Protestant/Unionist Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) in 1969, the Irish Catholic/Republican residents blockaded the area, declaring it "Free Derry" when a teenager painted the now iconic phrase on a house at the border (Spangler, 2009). Although the original wall was destroyed, a new one was built in its place (Figure 23) Resistance remains visible in the LL of Derry even beyond this iconic wall; graffiti is often used to cover or block the "London-" part of "Londonderry" (Figure 24)

Figure 23 (left): *Free Derry Wall*
Note. From Owen (1990). CC BY-SA 4.0.

Figure 24 (right): *Vandalized road-sign in Strabane, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland*
Note. From Invincible (2007). Public Domain.

The reclaimed name, embedded with its reification on the Free Derry Wall as well as its continued presence in the graffiti of bottom-up signage, symbolizes the resistance of the Irish Catholic/Republican minority against the Protestant/Unionist government (see Section 1.3). The wall has further become not only a landmark, but a call to action; as Irish Times reporter, Freya McClements notes in her article exploring the wall 50 years later (2019): "It is not merely a historical monument, or a memorial to the struggles of the past, but a focal point for the campaigns of the present and future" (McClements, 2019). For example, the wall has often been used to showcase Irish solidarity with Palestine (Figure 25). Indeed, earlier this year an artist who was chosen to repaint the wall replaced the phrase with the words of a Palestinian man, Dr. Refaat Alareer, who was murdered by Israeli forces on December 7th, 2023. Figure 26 shows a post of this wall from the Belfast group, KNEECAP, earlier this year. The Free Derry wall extends beyond merely the Irish Catholic struggle, but stands as an icon of solidarity and resistance against oppressive forces.

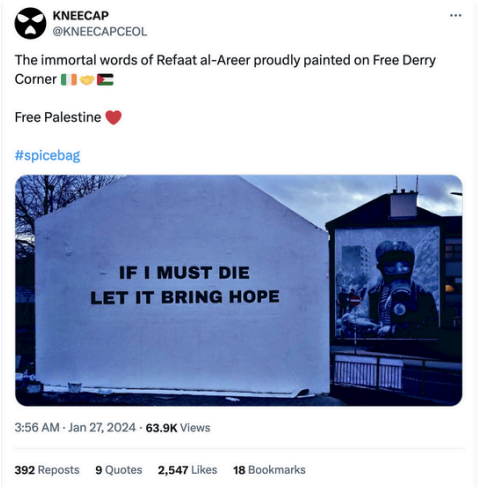

Figure 25 (left): *Derry Wall & Palestine Solidarity in 2009*
Note. From Bakker (2009). CC BY-SA 2.0.

Figure 26 (right): *Derry Wall & Palestine Solidarity in 2024*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on February 27, 2024. From KNEECAP (2024).

The inclusion of Irish language signage in the North, particularly in Belfast, has been a contentious issue marked by deep-seated sectarian divisions and conflicting perceptions. While efforts to increase bilingual signage reflect a push for linguistic diversity and cultural visibility, they have also encountered significant resistance, with some viewing the presence of the Irish language as divisive or even threatening. This opposition is rooted in historical tensions and ideological associations, where the Irish language symbolizes not only linguistic heritage but also political affiliations and past conflicts. However, amidst these challenges, language activist groups like An Dream Dearg continue to push for the recognition and revitalization of Irish, utilizing symbolism and grassroots activism to assert linguistic rights and resist language erasure. The struggle for language inclusion extends beyond mere signage; it embodies a larger battle for cultural identity and representation in a landscape marked by historical narratives and ongoing social dynamics. As demonstrated by the ongoing debates and actions surrounding language policy and symbolic expression, the issue of Irish language in the North remains deeply intertwined with broader questions of identity, power, and belonging.

3.1.3 ‘Language Abuse’: Issues with Mis-Translation and Mis-Spelling on Dual-Language Signage

Even when dual-language signage is approved and erected, the Irish that is presented on the sign is incorrect more often than one would think. Issues of incorrect spellings and translations are all too common throughout dual-language signage; indeed the problem is so

prevalent that there are multiple social media pages dedicated to calling attention to these signs. For example, the Facebook group called "Gaeilge Dána - Bad Irish" describes their page as "A home for photographs of all those badly translated public signs that seem to be so prevalent here in Ireland" (anonymized Facebook user, 2012). With about 1.3 thousand members, the page was quite active until the creator decided to close the group in 2023. Most of the posts are pictures of these poorly translated or misspelled signs around Ireland, with some posts adding similar images from Scotland and Wales. Comments are often a mix of Irish and English, and only a few explain the issues, with many assuming the inaccuracy is obvious to their audience. For example, a number of comments on the post shown in Figure 27 are threads of questions and responses concerning what was wrong with the sign. One user explains how *Slios an Aeir* is not a suitable translation for the English "Airside": "the problem is that simply transliterating an English word like 'air-side' into Irish is not likely to make a good translation" (anonymized Facebook user, 2023). Another user points out that *Taobh an Aerfoirt* would be more accurate, and that this more acceptable translation is actually what is listed on the government's eircode website (anonymized Facebook user, 2023). It is easy to imagine the frustration that comes along with these easily avoidable mistakes in public signage especially when the correct form is readily available.

Figure 27: *Mistranslation of 'Airside' to 'Slios an Aeir' in Gaeilge Dána*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on March 4, 2024. From anonymized Facebook user (2023).

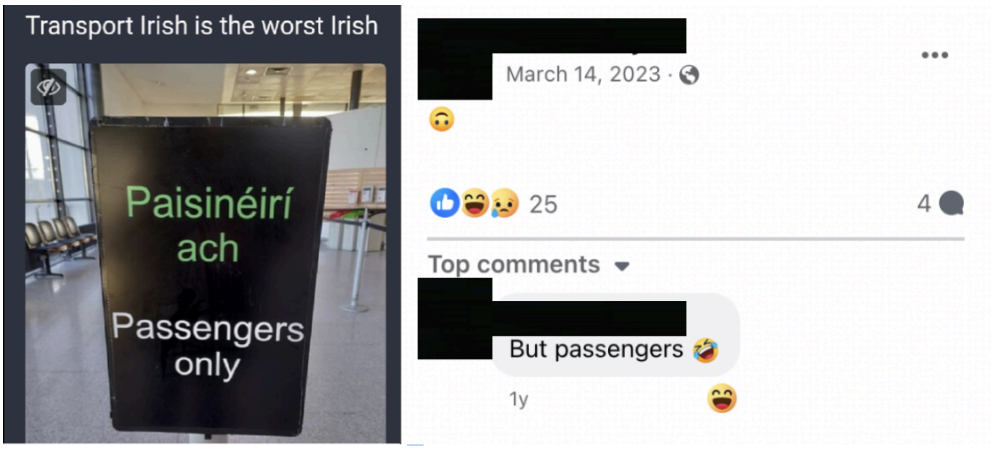

Figure 28: *Mistranslation of 'Passengers only' in Gaeilge Dána*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on March 4, 2024. From anonymized Facebook user (2023).

Figure 29: *Mistranslation and Misspelling in "Swipe card" sign in Gaeilge Dána*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on March 4, 2024. From anonymized Facebook user (2022).

Figure 30: *Misplaced fada in graffiti on sign in Gaeilge Dána*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on March 4, 2024. From anonymized Facebook user (2023).

Figure 31: *Incorrectly written fadas on Immigration Bureau sign in Gaeilge Dána*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on March 4, 2024. From anonymized Facebook user (2022).

The images shown in Figures 28-31 are taken from various posts in the Gaeilge Dána Facebook group, and they each show different instances of inaccurate words, phrases, or spellings in the Irish of the LL. Images in Figures 28 and 29 use incorrect grammar, and indeed the grammatical errors in the sign from Figure 29 are extremely confusing to an Irish speaker

> "it took me way too long to figure out what they were trying to say -even with the English translation!"
>
> *(comment from Figure 29 facebook post)*

Images in Figures 30 and 31 have issues with orthography. In the image in Figure 31, the graffiti adds an incorrect fada – or accent mark – above the a in *clais* [used here to refer to female genitalia derogatorily]. The sign in Figure 31 also has fada issues, marking them incorrectly as downward facing marks (à) instead of upwards facing ones (á) ('a' used for illustration purposes). The sign in Figure 29 also uses the letter 'v' which is not a part of the traditional Irish alphabet. While the inclusion of letters such as 'v' is a controversial topic, some users took issue with this directly:

> "Is fuath liom nuair a úsáidtear 'v' i bhfocail nua... Déan iarracht níos déine!
> ['I hate it when 'v' is used in new words… Try harder!']"
> *(comment from Figure 29 facebook post)*

> "It's an issue. Utter seafóid ['crap'] v a bheith ann ['v is there']"
> *(comment from Figure 29 facebook post)*

It seems as though those who are making these signs are taking advantage of the fact that many people in Ireland who do not speak Irish or are less familiar with the language would not necessarily be able to spot these errors. Additionally, the disregard for accuracy sends the message that the speech community is not worth checking with to make sure the translations are accurate, and thus reinforces the ideological hierarchy that places English above Irish. For example, responding to a news article about multiple misspellings on new dual-language signage around Belfast, one user claims that most "people wouldn't even notice" (see Figure 32). Other users claimed these errors must be "completely deliberate", and that "the bigots are at it", ("it" here being the disrespect of the Irish language).

Figure 32: *Post from RTÉ and comments*
Note. These screenshots were taken by the author on March 4, 2024. From @rtenews (2023).

While there is a certain level of respect for the symbolic importance of the language in the LL, there seems to be little respect for its activity as a functional language for the minority

language community. Instead of using these opportunities to provide fluent speakers with these translation jobs directly related to their language capabilities – thus providing more of an economic incentive to learn the language – or even doing research with an accredited Irish language resource such as Foclóir Gaeilge (an online Irish and English dictionary), sign curators seem to use the poor resource of Google Translate or use guesswork to make the language 'look' like Irish. In an RTÉ opinion post about signage translation and spelling issues, Sinéad Ní Ghuidir from University of Galway blames “carelessness, ignorance, and arrogance” for the misspelled and mistranslated signs, describing these mistakes as "cake decorations":

> “When misspelling occurs, the entire meaning of the word can change. The transposition of letters, throwing in a fada [the accent mark] here and there, sprinkling a séimhiú [an ‘h’ that marks consonant lenition] willy nilly like a cake decoration over the sentence, all seem to be acceptable practice. In Irish, there is a system and there are rules, as there are in every other language.” (Ní Ghuidhir, 2024)

Similarly, replying to a post in Gaeilge Dána, one user describes this trend as giving the words an "Irish flavour", noting the issue of direct translation as a kind of "bastardisation of the Irish language" (see Figure 33). Calling to mind attitudes towards linguistic legitimacy (see Section 2.3), another user responds by claiming these mistakes qualify as a kind of "Pidgin Gaeilge". It is important to note that using Google Translate and mistranslating one language into another is not considered a pidgin language.[7] In colloquial speech, the term 'pidgin' is used in a derogatory way in order to imply that the language variety is 'not real ' or 'lazy' versions of languages. Thus, Ní Ghuidhir is frustrated that such people do not see how Irish has "a system and there are rules". The controversies related to the standardized versions of Irish often use the term pidgin or creole to describe the influence of the English language on standardized Irish, which is likewise considered a "degradation" or "bastardization" of the language (see more in Section 2.3). By raising these attitudes and qualifiers here, this user likens outright translation, grammatical, and orthographic mistakes to a criticism of modern urban and/or standardized versions of Irish. Another comment, shown in Figure 34, does this as well, equating this perceived illegitimate Irish – or "Google Translate Irish" – to urban or standardized dialects – or "how people are speaking Irish now" (anonymized Facebook user, 2022).

[7] A pidgin language is a language that develops between two or more groups of people who do not share a common language. Once a pidgin is passed onto a generation of native speakers, it is referred to as a creole.

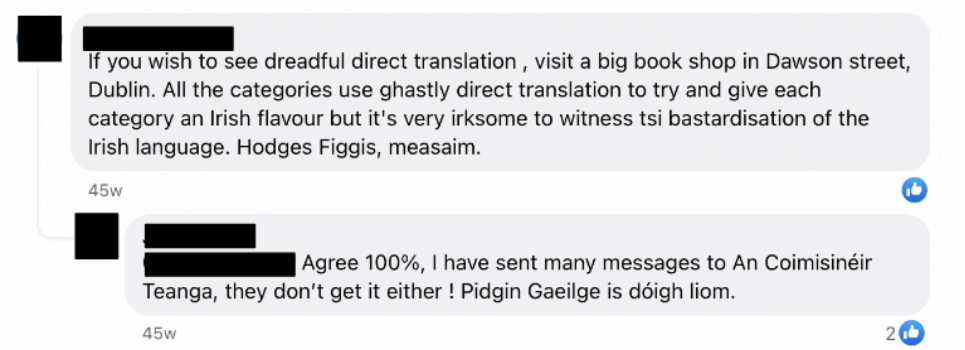

Figure 33: *Comments on post from Figure 29*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on March 4, 2024. From anonymized Facebook user (2022).

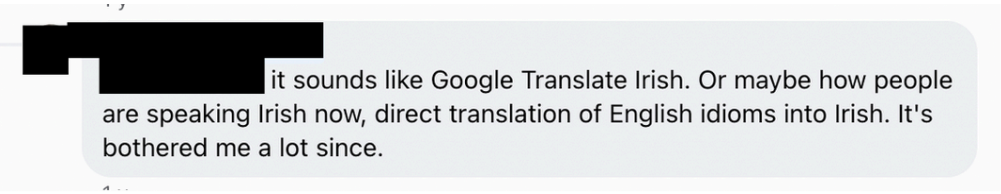

Figure 34: *Comments on post from Figure 29*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on March 4, 2024. From anonymized Facebook user (2022).

Direct translation – and thus often mis-informed and poorly researched translation – seems to be a controversial issue in Ireland that can tie into an understanding of Irish as a "difficult" language. For example, on dual-language signs outside the then newly renovated Enniskillen Workhouse, the Irish phrase "*An Teach Oibre*" is used for the English "workhouse," however, Irish speakers throughout Ireland commonly use the phrase "*Teach na mBocht*" for this kind of building:

> "The fact that this translation was chosen against the background of all workhouses anywhere in Ireland, [which are] commonly known as 'Teach na mBocht', shows a lack of detailed knowledge." (from Flaherty, 2023)

Despite the recommendations against "*An Teach Oibre*" from native Irish language speakers on the council as well as from a representative of an Enniskillen-based Irish language organization, one spokesperson for the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council claimed:

> "Both 'Teach Oibre' and 'Teach na mBocht' are correct, with 'Teach Oibre' chosen for grammar ease" (from Flaherty, 2023)

This blatant disregard for the rules, grammar, and idiom of the living language highlights the challenges and frustrations faced by the Irish language community in Ireland. The implied disrespect for the importance of Irish as a functioning community language is further

evidenced in the signs shown in Figure 36, in which the intention for Irish expressed by the phrase "Irish text here" is printed as a placeholder for the actual language itself. Indeed, the comments posted in Irish show reactions to the absurdity of these signs, translating to "That is pathetic", "Believe it or not", and "What the devil", respectively (translations from author).

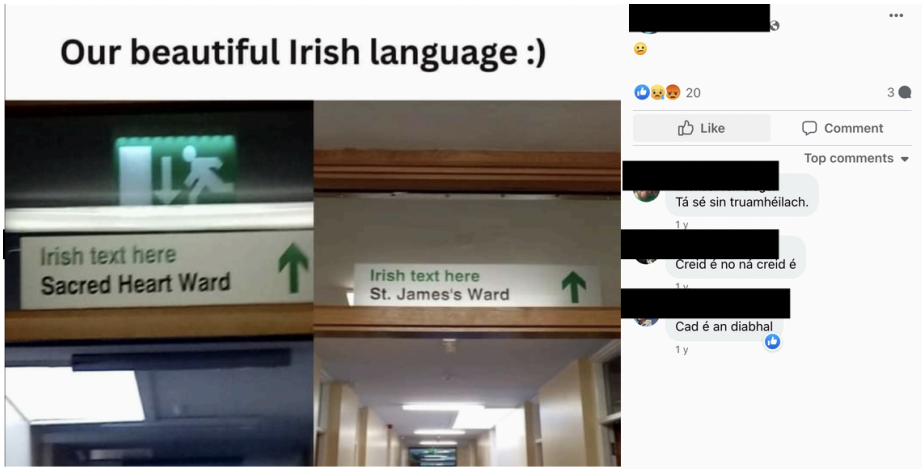

Figure 35: *Placeholder 'Irish text here' post in Gaeilge Dána*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on March 4, 2024. From anonymized Facebook user (2023).

The prevalence of mis-translations and mis-spellings on dual-language signage in Ireland highlights a concerning issue that extends beyond mere linguistic errors. Despite the symbolic significance of the Irish language, the lack of accuracy and attention to detail in signage creation demonstrates a disregard for its functional role within the minority language community. Social media platforms like "Gaeilge Dána - Bad Irish" have brought attention to these errors, showcasing instances where incorrect translations and grammatical mistakes have been overlooked or dismissed. The reliance on inadequate resources like Google Translate and the neglect of native speakers' expertise perpetuate the cycle of inaccuracies. These challenges underscore the frustrations faced by Irish speakers in maintaining the integrity of their language in public spaces, where inaccuracies not only distort meaning but also erode the cultural significance of Irish as a living, evolving language. Simultaneously, these mistakes perpetuate the divide between native speakers and second language speakers, the latter of which are then blamed for these issues and thus further ostracized from the larger speaker community.

3.1.4 Experiencing ‘Authentic Ireland’: Using Irish to Commodify a Particular Form of Irishness

Over the past decade, Ireland has become a popular tourist destination, attracting over 6 million tourists every year (Irish Tourist Industry Confederation (ITIC), 2023). Many

visitors express hopes to have an 'authentic' Irish experience. By this, they tend to picture cows in green fields, white cable-knit sweaters and flat caps, Irish step dancing, and traditional folk music (Markwick, 2001). As a result, Irish in the LL is often used to assist in commodifying certain elements of Irish place and traditional culture. The LL thus becomes a physical embodiment of predominant ideologies and attitudes concerning 'authentic' Irish identity. Using LL data from my time in Dublin, as well as the studies presented by Moriarty (2012; 2015) on Dingle, a Gaeltacht tourist town, as case studies, this section expands on the analysis of identity authenticity in Irish language ideologies. The patterns in which certain additional semiotic symbols are and are not used in the Ireland LL reveal diverse language attitudes of pervading authenticity ideologies.

Figure 36 (left): *Functional Irish LL: GPO Mail Slot,*
Figure 37 (right): *Symbolic Irish LL: GPO Sign*
Note. Both photographs were taken by the author in 2022.

Figure 36 shows two Irish phrases that appear on the Dublin General Post Office (GPO). The different ways in which the Irish is presented illustrate the ways that Irish in the LL is used more functionally (Figure 36) or more symbolically (Figure 37). The GPO reflects each of these uses particularly well because of its similar dual functions as both a working post office and as one of Ireland's most famous buildings. In Figure 37, an older spelling of the building's name is written in the *Cló Gaelach*–the Celtic/Gaelic font. This font was phased out alongside changes to orthography printing and spelling conventions during the 1960s. Predating these changes, this sign would likely be confusing to today's Irish speakers, as the new conventions would read: *ardoifig an phoist* rather than *árd oifig an puist*. Despite this discrepancy, the sign remains a predominant marker for the building. In contrast, the Irish that appears in the dual-language label for bulky newspapers shown in Figure 36 reflect modern spelling and font conventions. Therefore, the Irish in Figure 36 is used functionally as instructions for the mail-slot's use, and the Irish in Figure 37 is used symbolically to index the historic and political significance of both the building and the language as a reminder of

their roles in Easter Rising – an infamous armed conflict that set off the war for independence (see Section 1.3).

As a Gaeltacht town and popular tourist destination, Dingle has many similar instances of various representations of the Irish language. Just as we have seen for individual and group identity (Section 2), the Irish language is used in the Dingle LL to present the town as an 'authentic' Irish space (Moriarty 2015; 196). Within the framework asserting that tradition is culture and language, the 'traditional' Gaelic script fits within the perceived 'legitimate' or 'authentic' uses of the language. Simultaneously, these forms and representations of Irish present the language in a particularly dated 'traditional' way that perpetuates and capitalizes on a 'dead and/or ancient language' ideological framework.

Despite predominately using the standard roman orthography for important community function signs such as those in a supermarket or pharmacy, Irish language signage in Dingle often makes use of the Celtic font in tourist spaces (Moriarty 2015; 208). By using an outdated font based on medieval manuscripts, this explicit choice indexes a sense of antiquity that is thus projected onto the language itself for tourists and visitors. Rather than putting forth the image of the language's real and functional community use, these tourist signs instead capitalize on the perceptions of 'traditional' and 'untouched' Gaeltachtaí. As Órla explains:

ÓRLA;
1 It was.
2 Very much:
3 ahm,
4 A fossil.
5 Of a time gone by.

(Órla, Personal Interview, January 4, 2024)

As Dingle attracts tourists, they seem to project an image of offering a unique lens into this “time gone by”. Unlike the GPO sign, the use of the Celtic font in Dingle is not a preserved monument to the past but rather a commodification of the perception of Irish as an 'ancient' and 'traditional' language. In fact, it is a commodification of a certain disregard for the functional importance of Irish in favor of the language itself becoming a monument and "fossil" of Gaelic Ireland gone by.

The use of Irish in Ireland's linguistic landscape (LL) plays a pivotal role in shaping and promoting particular cultural identities, particularly for the context of tourism. As Ireland continues to attract millions of tourists seeking an 'authentic' Irish experience, the representation of Irish in signage becomes a means of commodifying elements of traditional Irish culture. While functional use aligns with contemporary orthographic norms, symbolic use, as exemplified by the Celtic font, taps into perceptions of antiquity and nostalgia, catering to tourists' romanticized notions of Gaelic Ireland. However, this romanticization risks reducing the living language to a mere artifact, detached from its functional role within

Irish-speaking communities. Thus, the representation of Irish in the LL reflects broader societal attitudes towards language authenticity and cultural heritage, underscoring the complex interplay between language and identity in contemporary Ireland.

3.2 "Listen to the Land Speak"[8]: Landscape Knowledge and Place Names

Tá an Chonair gafa agam míle uair	I've crossed the Conor Pass a thousand times
má té sé gafa aon uair amháin agam.	if I've gone once, yet each time it unveils
Fós cloisim scéalta nua uaidh gach uile uair,	new stories, revelations clear to me
lésanna tuisceana a chuireann	as rocks along the road, as actual
na carraigreacha ina seasmh i lár an bhóthair orm	as words articulated.
Faoi mar a bheadh focail ann.	

Excerpt from *Ag Tiomáint Siar* by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (1990)
(transl. 'Driving West' by Michael Coady)

Language and language attitudes reveal how connection to the land can be understood as an intrinsic part of an encompassing Gaelic worldview. This section explores the complexities embedded in an ideology that asserts 'language is land' and 'land is language' (Chiblow & Meighan, 2022). The *Gàidhlig* (Scottish Gaelic) word, *dùthchas* – which means the same as *dúthchas* in Irish – and the Gaeilge (Irish) word, *dinnseanchas,* are related terms that are embedded with responsibility and connection to the Gaelic indigenous landscapes. For example, some claim that this word is therefore a "word of the land":

> Dùthchas is a word of the land–it is derived from the Gaelic word 'dù / dùth' which can mean 'earth' or 'land'–[with] the emotional energy of belonging and responsibility the word conveys [...] As MacInnes [2006: 29] explains it, to the Gaelic mind, dùthchas is a total field of understanding, encompassing 'not so much a landscape, not a sense of geography alone, nor of history alone, but a formal order of experience in which all these are merged'. (MacKinnon & Brennan 2012: 9-10 in Chiblow & Meighan, 2022).

Similarly, the Irish poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill explains *dinnseanchas*, a compounded word from the two elements *dinn* ('a mountain or high place' and/or 'a landmark, eminent or notable place') and *seanchas*, which she notes is a word that is "wide enough to encompass all the work of the professional learned classes of early Gaelic society, which included the genealogies of powerful families, tribal lore, stories of conquest or migration, traditional laws and customs of the tribe" (Ní Dhomhnaill, 2005: 25). These words, often over-simplified in translation as ‘folklore’ in order to be more easily dismissed, show the importance of

[8] This title comes from a book of the same name: *Listen to the Land Speak: A journey into the wisdom that lies beneath us,* by Manchán Magan (2022). The book highlights the ancestral history of the Irish landscape and the relationship between people and land, specifically evidenced through language.

landscape knowledge and storytelling to Gaelic indigenous cultural knowledge. Indeed, when I asked Síobhra what Irish language reclamation meant to her, this connection to the land was prevalent:

SÍOBHRA; And I think that that,
<EMPHASIS> really <EMPHASIS> does,
give you,
that stronger sense of,
connection.
with the place you live in.
as well.
In terms of,
place names.
and even,
understanding the environment.
um,
and it brings up.
I suppose.
questions around climate change.
and so on.
there's that,
deep connection between the language,
and the land,
that you have,
access to.
that maybe others,
(H)
don't have access to.
Maybe not yet.
(%) ya'know th-
they're welcome to,
t-t-to tap into that.

(Síobhra, Personal Interview, February 6, 2024)

There is an undeniable connection between the fight against a disappearing language or culture and a collapsing environment. By offering language through which to understand the surrounding environment, Irish place names can contribute to fostering respect for the landscape by grounding the ideological connection to the land in language. Indeed, Meighan explains that *dùthchas* "stresses an ecological balance among all inhabitants and entities, human and more than human" (Chiblow & Meighan, 2022: 208). Thus, it is not only the land and landscape themselves that are tied into the language, but the inhabitants of the land as well; the land here is understood to be a vital and inseparable part of the culture and worldview of indigenous peoples. In Ireland, this is evidenced most widely in discussion of

place names. For example, in response to a reddit thread asking opinions about Irish and English dual-language signage, one user notes that the language itself is "an intrinsic part of the land" (see Figure 38).

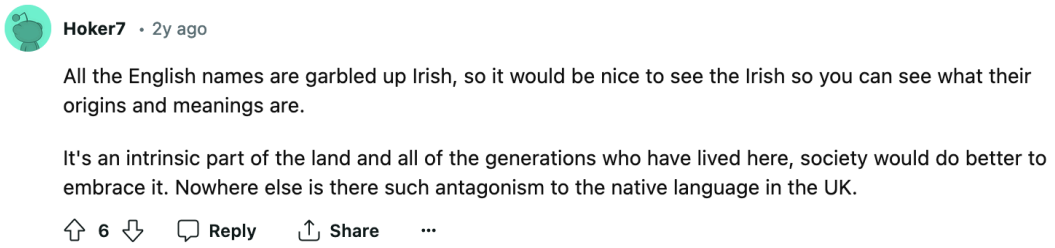

Figure 38: *Comment in r/northernireland from @Hoker7 (2022)*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on February 25, 2024. From @-CokeJones- (2022).

For this individual, the specific Irish language name given to a place is 'intrinsic' to the place itself, and therefore cannot be represented through anglicized names. Just as we have seen for personal names (Section 2.1), anglicized place names are understood as disconnected from certain aspects of identity. When this user says 'garbled up Irish', they refer to the English anglicization practices which took Irish place names and changed the sounds and spellings to sound more like English. Examples of these names alongside their original forms and translations are provided in the table shown in Table 2 below.

	Landscape Word(s)		**Place Name Example**		
	Irish	Anglicized Forms	Irish Name	Translation	English Name
a.	*cloch* ('stone')	clo, clogh, clough	*Clocháne*	'stony place'	Cloghane
b.	*tráigh* ('shore', 'beach')	tra, try	*Tráigh lí*	'shore of the (river) Lí'	Tralee
c.	*baile* ('town')	bal, bally, balli, bel	*Baile an Mhóta*	'town of the large mound'	Ballymote
	móta ('large mound')	mote			
d.	*sean* ('old')	shan	*Sean Cill*	'old church'	Shankill
	cill ('churchyard', 'graveyard')	kill			
e.	*dún* ('fort', 'haven')	dun, doon, down, downe	*Dún Doire*	'fort of the oak grove'	Dunderry

	doire ('oak', 'oak grove')	derry			
f.	*cluain* ('pasture', 'meadow')	clon, clone, cloon	*Cluain na nGamhan*	'pasture of the calves'	Clonygowan
	nGamhan ('calves'.GEN)	gowan			

Table 2: *Possible Anglicized Forms*
Note. This table was adapted from Johnston & Abbot (n.d.), and Wikipedia contributors (2024).

As evidenced in the table above, the anglicized versions of these words do not convey the meanings of the Irish phrases in any way. Indeed, they seem to lose any meaning at all, or even express something vastly different (as in example d where the anglicized 'kill' has a vastly different meaning in English than the Irish *cill*). Even with a general knowledge of Irish, the English transliterations are not nearly close enough to the Irish to be understood in a meaningful way – in fact, some parts of names are anglicized into the same form such as *baile* ('town'), *béal átha* (ford-mouth), and *bealach* ('pass', 'passage'), which have all appeared as 'bally' in various anglicized place names (Baile an Chaistil to Ballycastle, Béal Átha Beithe to Ballybay, and Bealach Cláir to Ballyclare). The erasure of the original names is understood by some as a loss of the connection with the land and culture itself; for example, the users in Figure 39 both have different views on the importance of language to the land. While the first user feels that the connection is vital, the second claims that "the land doesn't care what language we speak", operating within a different relationship with the land. This secondary framework connects to discussions of indigeneity or nativeness in contrast to foreignness, which often appear particularly in discussions about language learning (see more in Section 4). The comments in Figure 40 show how some individuals equate second language learners with learners of a foreign language, and thus disembody the language from the land itself.

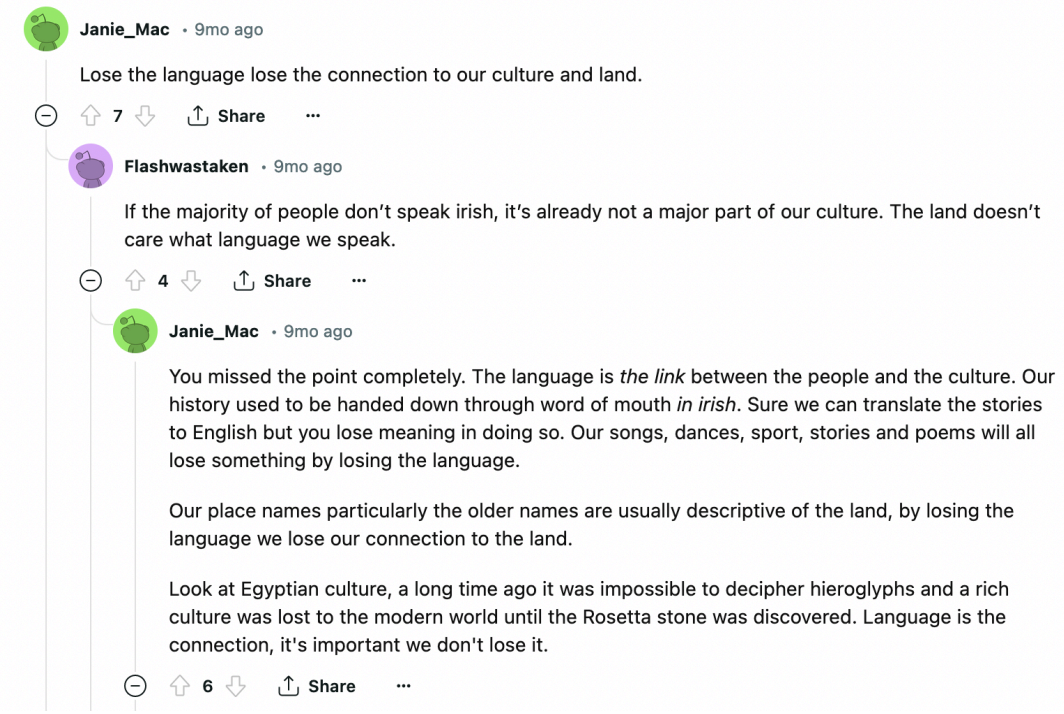

Figure 39: *Language and land from @Janie_Mac (2023)*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on February 25, 2024. From @Z3e24c123 (2023).

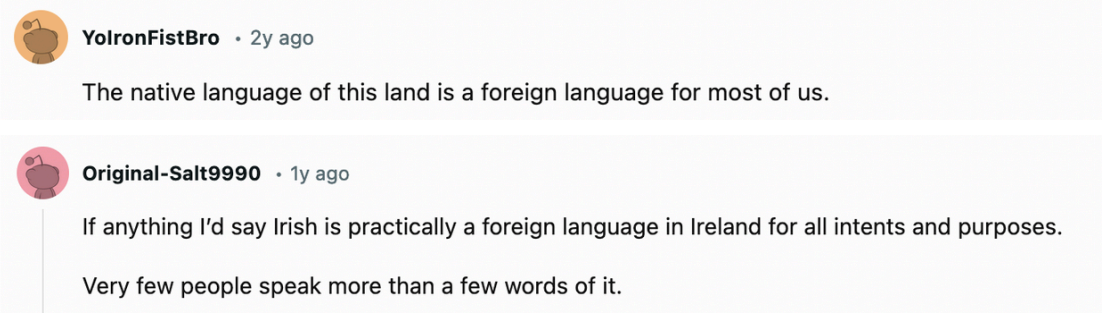

Figure 40: *Foreign language comments in r/ireland from @YolronFistBro (2022) and @Original-Salt9990 (2023).*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on April 27, 2024. From deleted Reddit user (2022).

These anglicized names are thus disembodied from the environments and landscapes of the place itself, which "make[s] it easier for the land and earth to be exploited" (Chiblow & Meighan, 2022: 207). Within an Irish indigenous understanding, language and people are critically linked to the land (as in the first user in Figure 40). Thus, the landscape is "imbued with the potential for insights into self and culture" rather than the colonizer's view of landscape as merely a repository of resources (Potts, 2003; 55). Thus, the interconnection between language, landscape, and cultural identity in Gaelic indigenous contexts highlights the intrinsic value of linguistic heritage in fostering a deep sense of belonging and

responsibility towards the land. Terms like *dúthchas* and *dinnseanchas* encapsulate the profound connection between language and environment, embodying not only geographical features but also the collective memory, history, and customs of the Irish indigenous community. This connection is further emphasized through the significance of Irish place names themselves, which serve as linguistic markers of cultural identity and environmental stewardship. However, the anglicization of these names results in a disconnection from the landscape and a loss of meaning, perpetuating a colonial legacy that facilitates the exploitation of land and resources. As highlighted by the parallel discussion on mistranslations and misspellings in signage (Section 3.1.3), accurate representation and preservation of linguistic heritage are crucial for fostering respect and understanding of both the speakers of the language as well as for the environment. By honoring the indigenous place name, we not only acknowledge the historical injustices of colonialism but also embrace diverse ways of knowing and being in the world. Ultimately, this can foster a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of language, land, and culture, enriching a collective heritage and promoting environmental stewardship.

4 Why Learn Irish?: How Language Attitudes Affect Learning Motivation in Ireland

Throughout Ireland, Irish language reclamation efforts face the same challenges of many other language revitalization movements: a lack of motivation for learning and using the language, a lack of opportunities to use the language, and a lack of proficient language teachers (Ceallaigh & Honnabháin 2015: 189). However, these challenges look very different on either side of the border. Following the implementation of an independent Irish Free State in the South, despite the persistence of the ideological importance for the Irish language, the attitudes towards the language's usefulness began to shift once it was no longer a tool to gain independence. However, since the symbolic importance of Irish as a national icon was still upheld, language policy became a key aspect of the new government, which has continued to target the educational system as "an agency and model for language planning, education, and revitalization" (Ceallaigh & Honnabháin 2015: 181). In the North – where the symbolic function of Irish as an identity marker remains a relatively high-stakes political symbol in the dominating ideology (see Section 3.1.2) – a goal to provide all-Irish schools became a driving force for those minority Irish speakers struggling against community and political conflict under the Unionist administration (Baoill 2007: 410). Figure 41 shows the ideological framework underlying these attitudes.

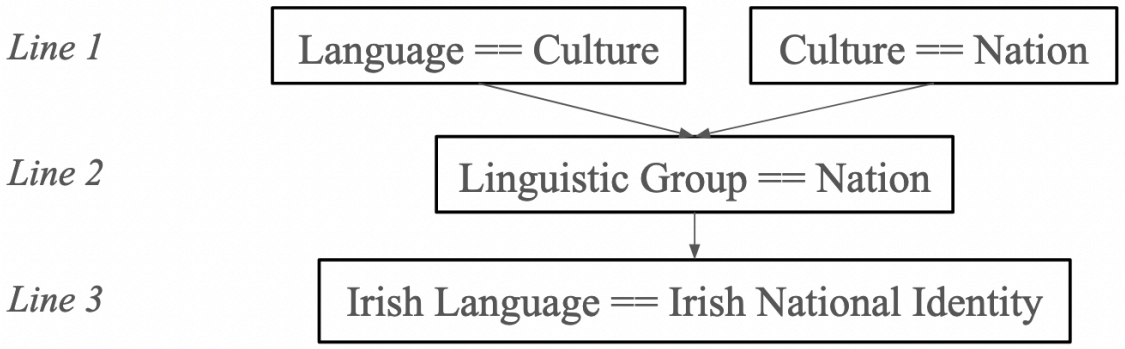

Figure 41: *Language and National Identity*

The use of the Irish language as a unique cultural identity icon has been of deep symbolic importance to the Irish Republican psyche, playing a key role supporting Irish independence (see Sections 1.3 and 2.2). The language, as well as other cultural practices, for many became iconic to an individual sense of Irishness itself (see Section 2.2). Irish language reclamation thus became ideologically equivalent to a political reclamation of the land. After the partition enforced new political and social borders in Ireland (see Section 1.3), the Irish language revitalization movement faced new challenges in a newly recognized nation, and exacerbated challenges in the occupied north. This section explores how different Irish language attitudes affect motivation for learning Irish. Guided by my conversation with Lucas, Section 4.1 traces the prolonged impact of a perceived 'usefulness' attitude through issues of agency and responsibility at play in the Republic of Ireland. And Section 4.2, guided primarily through Órla, explores how Irish language education in Northern Ireland faces challenges stemming from negative perceptions of its usefulness and systemic barriers.

4.1 Learning Irish in the Republic: "Can I complain about the Irish education system?"

"It's that subject no one really likes learning…with most Irish people [learning Irish] is a negative experience"

(Lucas, Personal Interview, November 19, 2023)

Throughout his education, Lucas attended English-medium schools, meaning that his classes were taught through English, and Irish was taught as a second language. Along with English-medium education, there are two other categories of Irish language education at the primary and post-primary levels in the Republic: Irish-medium (maintenance/heritage language education to native speakers in the Gaeltacht), and *Gaelscoileanna,* or Irish-medium immersion (immersion learning for new speakers outside the Gaeltacht). In addition to attending a *Gaelscoil*, Síobhra also went to a *Naíonra,* which is an Irish

immersion preschool. Despite these seemingly robust language policies in the Republic, a remarkable number of reports and research findings have shown a surprisingly low level of Irish language proficiency from students in the educational system despite the robust language policies in the South (Ceallaigh & Honnabháin 2015: 189).

While there are a wide range of experiences and attitudes towards the educational system, there is an outspoken attitude of negativity towards the way Irish is taught; for example, when describing his experience with Irish in school, Lucas used the phrase "it's frustrating" three times, claiming that "the systems, the schools are inadequate" (Lucas, Personal Interview, November 19, 2023). Indeed, these attitudes are so common that in the guidelines for an online Discord group called *Craic le Gaeilge* ('Fun with Irish'), immediately following a "no sexism, racism, or homophobia" rule, the server's creator writes, "We don't discuss the curriculum / educational system (see FAQ)" (@yunitex, 2022). Under the tab for frequently asked questions (FAQ), users will be able to see an elaboration on this rule in another post from the server's creator (shown in Figure 42).

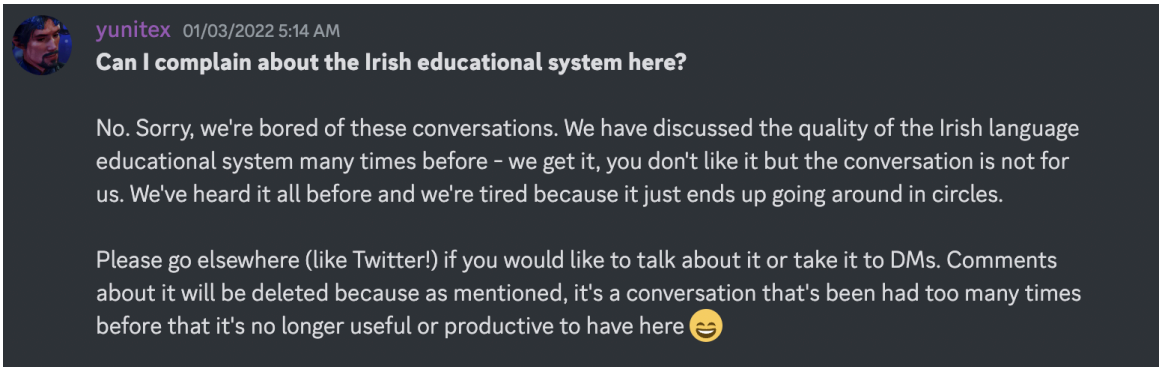

Figure 42: *FAQ in Craic le Gaeilge on Discord*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on November 20, 2023. From @yunitex (2022)

The presence of this question in a 'frequently asked' section, as well as the author's annoyance shown in phrases like, "we're bored of these conversations" and "we've heard it all before" illustrate how prevalent these conversations are for Irish language communities in Ireland. Additionally, this post shows that expressing these negative judgments in this particular space can be harmful to the speaker community; the goal to create a safe 'breathing space'[9] for Irish speakers is linked to a space separate from complaints and debates about how the language should be taught. By explaining that the conversation is "no longer useful or productive to have here" the creator of the server reveals a complex view of agency[10] and

[9] Defined by Belmar and Glass (2019: 9) as "a place where the minority language can be used freely, without the threat of the majority language," certain physical and virtual communities can become 'breathing spaces' for a language community.
[10] Agency is understood here using Sicoli (2011: 163): "the agency represented in a speaker's choice between language shift and language maintenance is a *contingent agency* based on the past history of the community practice and on its social organization" (emphasis added).

responsibility. Indeed, complaints about the quality of the Irish language educational system would only really be 'productive' when addressed to individuals that could enact institutional change. Therefore, the commitment to take responsibility for one's own linguistic education is a vital aspect of a positive and empowering language community. While the responsibility of the government and of the educational sector is deeply valuable, within an understanding of the complex and 'contingent agency' (Sicoli 2011: 163), it is equally important to empower individuals to find agency for language work within themselves and within their communities.

In spaces where individuals do voice their experiences, complaints, and critiques about Irish language education, frustration and sadness about language loss is evident through various attempts to answer the question: "why, despite learning the language in school for 13 years in school, most Irish people can't, or don't, speak Irish?" (Barra 2019: 97). Is it the failure of educational policies? The inadequacy of teachers? The students themselves? The circulation of blame throughout these conversations reveal various attitudes about agency, political priorities and governmental policy, the ineffectiveness and 'inadequacy' of Irish language schools and teachers, and concerns about the perceived 'usefulness' of Irish.

A common critique of the educational system regards a distinction between 'book Irish' instead of vernacular language skills. While reminiscent of arguments about 'real' and 'authentic' Irish as opposed to a standardized or urban dialect (discussed in Section 2.3), 'book Irish' can refer to curricula that is restricted to textbook and classroom Irish reliant on poetry and literature, rather than a focus on language acquisition and proficiency. For example, in Figure 43, users claim the Irish language education provided by schools is not suitable for a holistic language education, particularly with regards to its vernacular use.

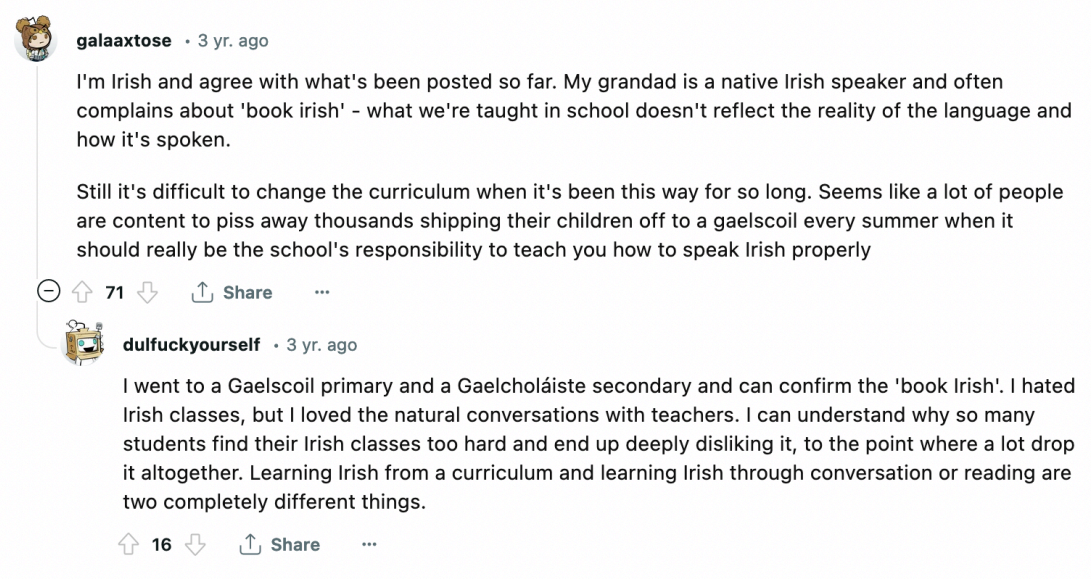

Figure 43: *Comments on 'book Irish' in r/linguistics*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on October 20, 2023. From @q203 (2020).

The second user in Figure 43 describes that despite having spontaneous and "natural conversations" with their teachers, they lacked a 'natural' or 'real' language environment elsewhere, including within the classroom itself. In this way, while spontaneous 'natural' context is indeed available in some schools–primarily Gaelscoileanna environments–the issue lies in sustainability beyond school grounds, where there is a lack of "contrived language opportunities and a dearth of cultural occasions to actively and purposefully use the second language" (Baker, 2001: 233). Access to natural language opportunities may very well be present in some school environments, however they are not fostered during class time, and often neither at home, and thus do not provide the necessary exposure and opportunity for a 'natural' use of the language.

In a similar thread from r/ireland called "Education: How did we get the teaching of Irish so wrong?" (@RunAgainstTheWind, 2018), one commenter writes about 'book Irish' as "a pointless waste of time" (Figure 44). This comment had nearly two-hundred up-votes, showing a widespread agreement throughout the page's viewers. Thus, we can see that many people value environmental and functional language learning because they believe it leads to actual language proficiency and use, rather than certain traditional ways of classroom language education that rely only on literacy knowledge.

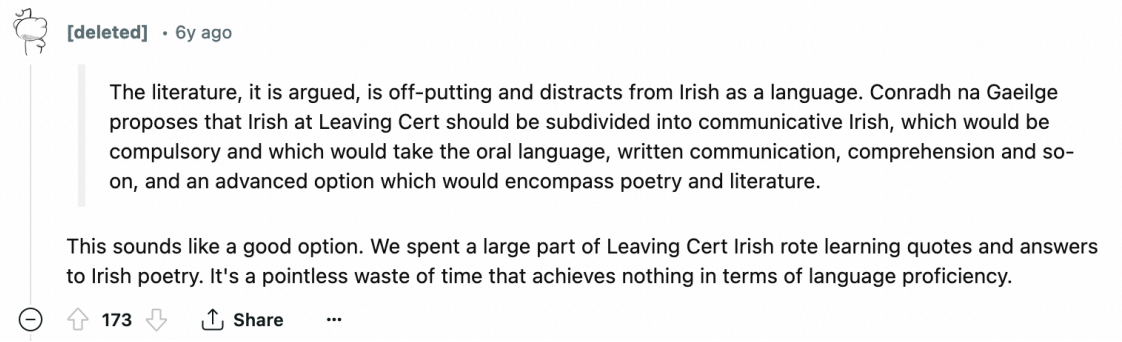

Figure 44: *More on 'book Irish' from deleted Reddit user (2018) in r/ireland*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on October 20, 2023. From @RunAgainstTheWind (2018).

While the distinction between reclamation and revitalization can sometimes be subtle, in this context, the focus seems to be more on revitalization rather than reclamation.[11] Revitalization efforts aim to promote active language use and proficiency in contemporary contexts, whether through immersive experiences, community engagement, or innovative educational approaches. This differs from traditional classroom language education, which may prioritize literacy knowledge over spoken proficiency. Therefore, the emphasis on language proficiency and use from the user comment in Figure 44 aligns more closely with revitalization efforts aimed at sustaining and enriching language use in everyday life, rather than the reclamation efforts that focus not on creating speakers, but on cultural knowledge in an extra-linguistic sense. Those that feel this way often attribute the issues of Irish language acquisition to the predominating 'book-Irish' curricula, which is regarded as "a pointless waste of time" (deleted Reddit user, 2018). Rather than disregarding the 'book-Irish' altogether, another user, @Whool91 (2024), offers a more complex view (Figure 45) in response to a similar r/ireland thread titled, "If it's so well known that the way Irish is taught is so awful, why hasn't it been changed?" (deleted Reddit user, 2024). This user emphasizes the importance of creating space for individuals with various feelings towards the language's connection to culture. If Irish is taught as two separate subjects – one that operates more in a revitalization framework, and one that extends into reclamation – then the user believes that this could be a helpful framework through which to teach Irish to those with diverse ideologies about the language. Note that @Whool91 uses the idea of teaching Irish as a "foreign language" in order to distinguish between second language learning methodologies and native speaker language classes. While this can be a helpful way to explain the differences, it also brings up issues around how "foreign" and "native" are used in Irish language discourse (see Section 3.2).

[11] Reclamation involves reconnecting speakers or community members with certain linguistic elements of a marginalized culture. On the other hand, revitalization is about actively sustaining and increasing the use of a language, which often involves creating new speakers regardless of their interest in the extra-linguistic elements of the culture. (See "Theoretical Framework" in Section 1.2)

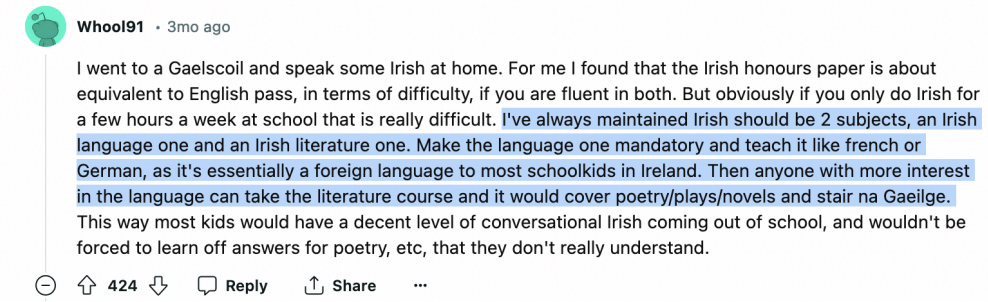

Figure 45: *Comment from @Whool91 (2024) on how Irish is taught in r/ireland*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on April 27, 2024. From deleted Reddit user (2024) Emphasis added.

Moreover, the conversation in Figure 43 extends the need for inclusive learning beyond language learning methodologies themselves to encompass broader societal implications. The phrase "Seems like a lot of people are content to piss away thousands shipping their children off to a gaelscoil" places a moral judgment towards those who have the ability to take on a level of responsibility and agency for the language in that way; at the same time, it highlights a significant class dynamic regarding access to perceived acceptable language learning resources. Continuing the sentence, the user writes, "it should really be the school's responsibility to teach you how to speak Irish properly" (@galaaxtose, 2021). This statement reflects a perspective that shifts the responsibility of language proficiency entirely onto educational institutions, disregarding the multifaceted nature of language acquisition and the role of individual effort. However, it underscores a valid concern about the accessibility of language learning resources, particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

In addition to blaming the curricula and schools themselves, some individuals place responsibility on the language policies implemented by the government. While the role of the government in language policy extends beyond the educational sector, many comments critiquing language policy appeared in response to questions or comments related to schools and education, linking the political dimensions of general language policy to efforts in schools and confidence in speakers. For example, the comments shown in Figure 46 are responses to a question posted on the subreddit r/linguistics: "Why is Irish still taught so badly in the Irish school system despite the vast majority of Irish people agreeing that it should be changed?" (@q203, 2020). Users commented that the perceived failings of the educational system stemmed from the lack of concrete political action, alleging that politicians promise to devote resources to Irish language reclamation but end up not doing much of anything.

Figure 46: *Politics and Irish language perceived usefulness from @lskjempe (2020)*
Note. Screenshot from author on November 24, 2023. From post in r/linguistics from @q203 (2020).

As a response to the educational debate, the comment implies that the Irish learned in school currently is not 'useful' – indeed, it seems that just as the Irish of the LL serves mainly a symbolic function for the Republic (see Section 3.1), so too does the 'book-Irish' that is learned in schools. Thus, language learning is often thought to be symbolic and not functional; despite not using and growing their linguistic abilities in Irish, the establishment of Irish language educational policy seems to check a box. Furthermore, because of the legal recognition of the Irish state in the South, the need for the language to validate the ideologically formed Irish national identity has been eroded.

4.2 Learning Irish in the North: Agency, Defiance, and Reconciliation

> *"It's all these things that we have had to create ourselves, because okay there's a market for it, but it's also the fact that they're not statutory established either [laughs] d'ya know what I mean like, it's just through the will of the people"*
> (Órla, Personal Interview, January 4, 2024)

Irish language education in Northern Ireland faces negative usefulness attitudes as well as additional ideological and political challenges. Although Irish is offered in some formats, it can often be difficult to access for many people. Take Órla's experience for example: Órla was able to attend a grammar school[12] in South Belfast only after going through a rigorous standardized examination for academic selection called the 11+ exam. Rather than the Republic's compulsory Irish, this school required that students take French

[12]In Northern Ireland, a "grammar school" is a selective secondary school emphasizing academic achievement, usually requiring entrance exams for admission.

through year 3. Following that, students had the option between Spanish, German, or Irish. Órla, having chosen Irish, had to apply to study the language, and was one of about 30 (out of 180) that was selected to participate.

ÓRLA;
Lookin' back,
I think that.
the school would do,
everything in their pow'r to eradicate Irish from,
the program.
of um,
subjects.
(H) um,
<LIST> it wasn't seen as a profitable language.
it wasn't seen as an economic language.
it wasn't seen,
as a potential career path.
it wasn't viewed to have sorta, (Hx)
ya'know,
the, <LIST>
just the sorta prestige attached to it.
as the same,
as what Spanish or German would?
and ya'know,
<AFFECT> it wouldn't have gotcha a good job <AFFECT>
and things like that so.

(Órla, Personal Interview, January 4, 2024)

Most of these negative statements reflect Órla's observation of the negative perception of usefulness for the Irish language in an economic sense. She also mentions the "prestige" that is often attached to languages such as Spanish or German, but not to Irish. These negative attitudes and associations towards the language pervaded Órla's educational community. As a result, those interested in the language in grammar school can feel ostracized or isolated:

ÓRLA;
If you were interested in languages.
or,
god forbid you were interested in @Irish.
like,
you were almost like,
a weirdo.
@d'ya know what I mean.
you were an anomaly.

(Órla, Personal Interview, January 4, 2024)

Furthermore, Órla described how her hope to pursue her Irish language education was also outwardly discouraged by her teachers:

ÓRLA;
A teacher actually approached me.
and was like <VOX>
listen.
like,
why are you doin' Irish?
like,
why is that you're first choice?
you'd be far better to do law.
or you'd be far–
like,
sure you do drama,
you're good at actin'.
you'd be a good lawyer.
or um,
you do English literature.
and you're good at writing essays and stuff.
why don't you do journalism.
why don't you do– <VOX>
an–
like they were just tryna push,
and push,
and push their agenda on me.
as the like,
sorta,
I-I-I was almost like a,
a blot.
on their,
their copy book.
because I wanted to go and do Irish.
and it didn't look good for the school.

(Órla, Personal Interview, January 4, 2024)

The challenges faced by individuals like Órla in accessing Irish language education in Northern Ireland reflect broader societal attitudes and systemic barriers. Despite the availability of Irish language programs, negative perceptions of the language's usefulness persist, particularly in comparison to economically valued languages like Spanish or German. This perception is deeply entrenched within educational institutions, where Irish language learners may face ostracization or discouragement from teachers and peers alike. Órla also spoke to issues of attitudes that center Irish as a 'dangerous' language, specifically linking these notions to both the economic "grudge" as well as to her family's experiences with violence during the Troubles in Belfast:

ÓRLA; There's sorta like,
we call it like,
a generational gap,
in,
my family.
(H) my mother weren't Irish speakers.
they know bits and pieces,
but sorta,
the time in which they were growin' up,
in 1950s,
60s Belfast,
it wasn't
(H) really a very,
safe thing to be doin'.
(H) and also,
ya'know,
there was sorta like this.
<AFFECT> (TSK) economical sorta grudge
attached to the language as well. <AFFECT>
with like,
ya'know,
what's the Irish language gonna do for ya.
and ya'know,
it's causin' so much destruction and pain and violence and,
(H) and things like that.

(Órla, Personal Interview, January 4, 2024)

Órla reflects on the generational gap within their family, attributing her parents' lack of fluency to the socio-political climate of 1950s and 60s Belfast, where speaking Irish was associated with danger and economic disadvantage. In contrast, another individual, posting in an r/nothernireland thread (Figure 47), after noting that they're from a loyalist background, expresses frustration over the community uproar against introducing Irish language education in their daughter's school, highlighting ongoing tensions and resistance towards linguistic diversity. These divergent perspectives underscore the enduring legacy of historical narratives and political divisions in shaping attitudes towards the Irish language in contemporary Northern Ireland.

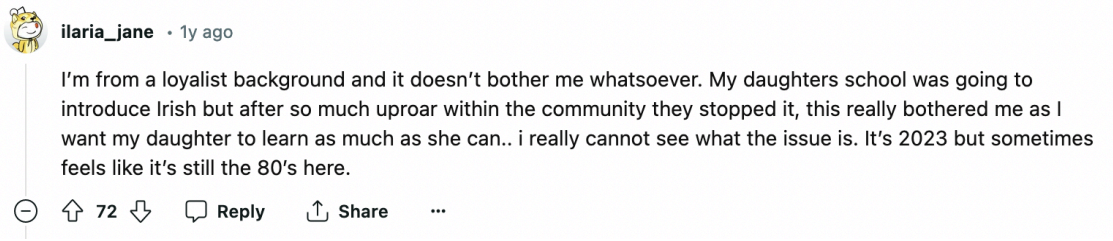

Figure 47: *Comment from @ilaria_jane (2023) on language access*
Note. This screenshot was taken by the author on April 27, 2024. From @BelfastAmadan (2023).

The intergenerational impact of historical trauma and political tensions on attitudes towards the Irish language in Northern Ireland is evident in the contrasting experiences shared by individuals from different backgrounds. These experiences underscore the importance of language ideologies and attitudes to language revitalization and reclamation work. Initiatives such as the Turas Language Project have been successful in using language learning itself in order to provide reconciliatory opportunities in Belfast (Miller & Mitchell, 2017). Through community-driven efforts and grassroots activism, projects like Turas aim to counteract systemic marginalization of minority languages and promote positive associations in order to encourage new speakers and learners. By providing accessible and inclusive language learning opportunities, such initiatives empower individuals to either reclaim their linguistic and cultural identities or learn about others' identities through the Irish language. Indeed it seems that these grassroots initiatives prevail in the face of institutionalized discrimination and linguistic hegemony precisely because they are community-led:

SÍOBHRA;	1	It's actually,
	2	very much an act of defiance.
	3	against,
	4	um,
	5	the:,
	6	status quo.
	7	(H) in a way that it isn't in the South. (Hx)
	8	and,
	9	what's quite interesting is,
	10	the defiance has been eroded in the South?
	11	because,
	12	it's been,
	13	(H) um,
	14	somewhat supported but not really?
	15	at a political level.
	16	um,
	17	there isn't that same push,
	18	or demand,
	19	for services.

20 or demand,
21 uh for recognition.
22 and in the North it's actually the demand,
23 and the push against the status quo.
24 (H) that is keeping the,
25 language relevant,
26 and is actually attracting more people. (H)
27 to the um,
28 language,
29 community.

(Síobhra, Personal Interview, February 6, 2024)

Síobhra's observation highlights the unique context of Irish language usage in Northern Ireland, where speaking Irish becomes not only a means of cultural expression but also an act of defiance against the prevailing status quo. This defiance is rooted in the historical and political context of the North, where linguistic and cultural identities have been deeply intertwined with broader issues of identity and belonging. In contrast, the erosion of defiance in the South, as described by Síobhra, reflects a different socio-political landscape where the demand for Irish language services and recognition may be less pronounced. This stark contrast underscores the significance of language activism and community mobilization in shaping the trajectory of minority language revitalization efforts.

5 Conclusion

This research highlights the critical importance of understanding the interconnected experiences of language communities across the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. While sociolinguistic studies have often focused on one territory at a time, this paper sheds light on the shared 'language=identity' ideology that shapes the linguistic landscape of both regions. Through an analysis of media and interview data, it becomes evident that while many Irish individuals identify strongly with this ideology, various controversies persist regarding attitudes about language legitimacy, speaker agency, and perceived utility. These findings underscore the complexity of language dynamics in Ireland and emphasize the need for comprehensive, accessible, and inclusive language reclamation and revitalization initiatives. It is clear that addressing language ideologies and attitudes is essential for fostering a supportive environment for native and new speakers alike. By acknowledging and confronting these challenges within the community of Irish speakers as a whole, as well as within individual speaker communities, participants and language planners can work towards creating a more inclusive and sustainable linguistic future for Irish speakers across both territories.

The findings of this research not only contribute to our understanding of Irish language dynamics but also provide valuable insights that can inform and guide efforts to revitalize and reclaim endangered and minority languages in communities worldwide. The complexities surrounding ideologies and attitudes, particularly those related to identity and perceived usefulness, are not unique to the Irish context but are common challenges faced by many minority and indigenous language communities globally. This examination of Irish has shown how the importance of inclusive language policies, community engagement, and the promotion or reframing of significant language ideologies and attitudes must be considered as key factors in fostering language reclamation and revitalization.

Suggestions for Further Research:

Recognizing the paramount importance of social interactions and community engagement in fostering language proficiency and cultural continuity, a promising further field of study would explore the role of social learning platforms (such as social clubs or language summer camps, language media, and community organizations) in fostering positive language ideologies and attitudes. Furthermore, by exploring marginalized groups within the Irish language community (such as BIPOC or LGBTQ+ identifying individuals), we can build a better understanding of how identity informs language choices within a minority language community. Overall, further research that integrates specific studies of social learning spaces and more diverse identity experiences would contribute to a better understanding of minority language dynamics as they relate to identity and social connections.

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