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Learners, Native Speakers and the Authenticity of Language

IWAN WMFFRE

The continual weakening of Celtic societies has meant that the ability to absorb and integrate newcomers through natural social processes has, for the most part, been lost and accompanied by the emergence of a category of Celtic speakers who can be labelled 'learners', 'second-language speakers' or 'Neo-Celtic speakers'.[1] Were all learners easily integrated into the Celtic native speakers' society there would hardly be a need to say as much concerning them, but it is plainly evident that this is not the case with many learners in the contemporary Celtic countries. Their importance for and influence on each Celtic language is much greater than that of learners of such languages as English, French, German, or Spanish. Important because of the weakness of the native speakers, the emergence of the learner class phenomenon is of particular interest and demands that we give special consideration to how they interact with the native speakers.

The acquisition of a second language through sustained exposure to another society whereby outsiders learn to adapt to that society can be taken as a natural feature of intercourse between humans. However, the expansion of education to all classes of society in nineteenth-century Europe modified this acquisition process and generalised language learning through course-books, grammars and dictionaries, enabling those learning second languages to learn them independently of the native speakers. As it now became possible to set about learning a language independently of the surrounding society, an increasing number of second language speakers emerged who displayed idiosyncratic tendencies (of both literary and xenolectal origin) in their use of competency of speakers from the point of view of one of the languages in a bilingual situation – the target language[3].

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[1] The first is the commonest in Britain, the last is commoner in France where the usual term for a speaker who has learnt Breton is *Néo-bretonnant* (though the term *apprenant* appears to be becoming increasingly common).

Figure 1.
Spectrum of competency of bilingual speakers

full native competency **AB+**	**intermediate native competency** **A+B- or A-B+**	**non-native competency** **AB-**
native speakers in a homoglot environment	native speakers in a heteroglot environment or non-native speakers in a heteroglot environment	non-native speakers in a homoglot environment

Despite there being four input categories I would argue that, for purposes of determining language competency, these four input categories give only three output categories: i) full native, ii) intermediate native, iii) non-native. Furthermore, despite the disparate degrees in natural competence evoked by the table, I advocate separating the non-native category (AB-) on the one side from all the remaining categories on the other side, to constitute the definition of 'learner' as opposed to 'native speakers'. It will be seen from Figure 1 that though the term 'native speaker' is usually restricted to individuals who have acquired the language at home, 'native speaker competency' extends to encompass individuals who

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[3] Since everyone has a native language both the target language as well as the labels 'native' and 'non-native' in Figure 1 can be reversed.

have acquired the language in their surrounding society. In this essay 'native speaker' will refer to competency rather than to 'background', for I hold that taking the surrounding vernacular or societal language (B) into consideration gives a truer picture of the natural competence of an individual in a target language than certain analyses that would refer only to the home language (A).

Despite the usefulness of the above categorisation let no one ignore the reality of an unbroken sliding scale of competency that smoothes the divide between complete fluency and naturalness as against complete unfamiliarity in a language (that typically tends to characterise native speaker competency compared to that of learners). In the Celtic countries, native speakers are far from displaying a uniform competency: there are, for example, individuals who are defined as 'stunted' native speakers by Morgan (2000: 126) as their native language was abandoned after childhood and they subsequently lived in a wholly English/French environment. There also exist children brought up in the 'learner' language of their parents who have minimal or even no contact with the native speaker society and are 'native speakers' of sorts by virtue of their home language (Morgan 2000: 132)[4]. Moreover, there seems to be a convergence of the language of young native speakers and learners in English/French urban environments. I am unaware of any research into the features of this convergence of 'native' and 'learner Welsh', but my impression from my own experience of such places as the Welsh schools of Cardiff was that the language felt more Anglicised than the Welsh of non-native speakers brought up in very Welsh environments. Exposure to the language seems to be the determining factor in establishing fluency.

Having elaborated on terminology, this essay will now attempt to survey the mismatches and tensions that have arisen between both categories of Celtic speakers, a tension looked to educational methods and to learners to halt the catastrophic decline of the native language.

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[4] Although the term cannot help but be pejorative, their speech can be labelled technically a 'creole'.

As the official decennial census in France does not ask questions pertaining to Breton, the 1999 census does not provide any information on language matters. Apart from this exception, the losses of native speakers for the Celtic languages have been well documented by the official decennial censuses of Britain and Ireland during the twentieth century. However, neither the decennial British census of 2001 nor the quinquennial Irish census of 2002 distinguishes learners from native speakers. As a result the undoubted increase in learners is only hazily perceived through some educational surveys and the odd official survey.

Notwithstanding qualifications as to the evidence, the picture that emerges is of a changing ratio of learners to native speakers. This change is most clearly seen in Ireland where it is estimated that there were nine times as many native speakers as learners in 1891. Following the establishment of compulsory lessons in Irish by nationalist governments after 1922 the ratio changed and there were seven times as many learners to native speakers in the 1960s (Ó Cuív 1969: 129). At present there are probably ten learners to every native speaker.

The Irish situation is singular, for no such ratio between native speakers and learners exists in the other Celtic countries. Nevertheless, the contemporary situation in Wales seems to be rapidly evolving in the much the same way as Ireland, especially since the establishment in 1988 of compulsory Welsh lessons in secondary schools. General surveys conducted by the Welsh Office in 1992 and 1995 concluded that there were six native speakers to every four learners (Evas 1999: 120f.; Aitchison and Carter 2000: preface). A ratio breakdown by dates of birth of a 1995 official survey gave portentous signs for the future.

Overall, it must be remembered that the overwhelming number of the vast increase of learners in both Ireland and Wales are schoolchildren whose motivation and competency is questionable following the institution of compulsory

teaching of the Celtic language. This contrasts with the situation in Brittany in the 1990s, where due to lack of institutional compulsion, native speakers still far outnumber learners. However, few of the native speakers are younger than fifty years of age whereas almost all the learners are younger. In Scotland, the ratio of Scottish Gaelic speakers between the Highlands and its diaspora in the English-speaking urban areas of the Lowlands has also disimproved. In 1881, there were some nine native speakers to every learner. Currently the number of native speakers and learners appears to be equal (MacKinnon 2003).

We have clearly reached a point in the development of the Celtic languages where there are as many if not more learners than native speakers. This has far-reaching implications for learners of these languages who are increasingly unlikely to meet with native speakers. It seems clear to me – linguistically speaking at least – that the learner should learn everything from the native speaker, but as far back as 1957 Proinsias Mac Cana (Welsh Unity: 1.17) looked forward to the day when the English-speaking Welshman 'will receive more recognition as the position of the Welsh language deteriorates, and one can perceive even now a gradual change of attitude'.

It is also apparent that those communities that best approach a comprehensive societal use of the Celtic language should receive support most urgently. Yet when MacKinnon (2003) noted the almost equal distribution of Scottish Gaelic speakers between the traditional western areas and the Lowlands of Scotland, he concluded:

> This has important implications for Gaelic policies. If these are conceived as mainly or only directed towards Gaelic speakers and communities in the Highlands and Islands, they will fail to reach or benefit almost half of all Gaelic speakers.

The native speakers form the hard kernel of any attempt to preserve and promote the Celtic languages, yet the Welsh language planner Jeremy Evas (1999: 352) states of learners that:

Figure 2.
Linguistic contrasts between native-speakers and learners:[7]

native speakers	**learners**
• geographically variable	• uniform
• open to loanwords	• resistant to loanwords
• resistant pronunciation	• influenced pronunciation
• resistant syntax	• influenced syntax
• resistant semantics	• influenced semantics

Apart from the case of a few very exceptional individuals, the above contrasts hold true as diagnostic markers for recognising the speech of learners. It is pronunciation, perhaps, that constitutes the most compelling single diagnostic for recognising a learner. Whereas native speakers, who have had little or no formal schooling in their language, only subconsciously perceive the ill-famed Celtic consonantal mutations, they are more likely to notice a difference of pronunciation as is suggested by the fact that several words exist for an accent (twang, brogue or burr) – Welsh: *llediaith*.[8] Since the reality of pronunciation can only be approximately described in books and is only acquired through sustained exposure to the speech of native speakers it is hardly surprising that it should be one of the most difficult features of the language to acquire. Comparing a variety of language-learning situations, Odlin (1989: 158-60) concluded that the more heavily accented a learner's pronunciation, the more it tended to provoke negative reactions, although such an accent would of itself never lead to an individual being excluded, as long as it is easily comprehensible.

Societal exposure is the key to acquiring full competency in any language. The undoubted advances in the status and the teaching methods of the Celtic languages have not compensated for the disintegration of strong traditional Celtic-speaking societies since 1950, a fact that is made painfully obvious when comparing the competency of the Welsh attained by English-speaking children who were evacuated to Ceredigion during the World War Two to that of Welsh learners in the same area since the 1970s. Of course, advocating any principle is usually easier than constantly holding to it, and even amongst those learner enthusiasts who have appropriated a Celtic language as their family language, and English or French remains the 'reflex' language – the true native tongue – for strong emotions such as quarrels (Kabel 2000: 134f.). I remember well a Welsh learner in Aberystwyth who after criticising his Welsh-speaking flatmate for using some items of English vocabulary promptly returned to read his newspaper unwittingly muttering to himself in English as a news story would intermittently raise his ire.

There are a number of social contrasts between native speakers and learners, the former tend to be rural (and thus decreasing and aged) whilst the latter tend to be urban (increasing and young). Inhabiting different backgrounds and often holding contrasting attitudes, learners and native speakers do not mix enough to form an unquestioned unity. In Scotland there is evidence of such a split between two groups, Morgan (2000: 132) points out that the majority of native speakers of Scottish Gaelic, living on remote islands, never meet learners of the language most of whom come from the lowlands of Scotland if not from further afield. A similar split is even more marked in Brittany, where one finds the most extreme examples of a 'learner culture' divorced from the native speakers, accurately revealed by Maryon McDonald in her entertaining ethnological work, *We are not French!* (1989).

Just as there are some societal contrasts between native speakers and learners, there also tend to be attitudinal contrasts between them as to the form the language should take, most pronounced in the case of lexical purism. I well remember hearing a shocked learner in Aberystwyth in the clearly demarcated registers to every Celtic language: a colloquial and a literary register. Deficient or total lack of education in these languages during the late nineteenth century and twentieth century has left older native speakers relatively unfamiliar with literary registers (at least in comparison with contemporary English or French speakers). Whilst the slow increase in education in Celtic languages has tended to profit the younger generations, concomitantly, these have usually been brought up in a much poorer native environment where there have been substantial intrusions of Anglicisation and Gallicisation.

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[7] After George (1986: 52f.).

[8] The Welsh term *llediaith* is pejorative – its etymology being *lled* 'half' and *iaith* 'language' – and is also sometimes applied to unfamiliar Welsh dialects.

It is into this societal context that the increase in learners in most Celtic countries since the 1950s must be set (Ireland being exceptional in that it experienced the learner phenomenon from the 1890s in the context of a movement for independence that proved itself successful). Thus Celtic learners since the 1950s can be portrayed, in a generalising way, as people more familiar with literary sources than with the speech of the native speakers. Their dependency upon written sources for their instruction has encouraged them to react negatively to the perceived failings of native speakers especially in as much as they could recognise blatant loanwords from English or French and consonantal mutations or pronunciations that did not match what they had learnt in books. What was not found in their books, grammars or dictionaries was labelled dialect, slang, corruption and any suspected foreign influence was taken as proof of decadence.

Even in monoglot societies there are major language differences between individual native speakers so that it is hardly surprising that in a bilingual society a weakened exposure to a language can lead to a deficiency in native competency and to the category of speaker labelled 'semi-speaker'. The concept of the 'semi-speaker' was popularised by Dorian (1977, 1981) in her studies of a Scottish Gaelic dialect of the periphery of the Scottish Gaelic speaking area and seems to equate to the concept of 'semilingual' popularised in the English-speaking world by Skutnabb-Kangas (1981: 35-9).

It is to Dorian's credit that it was the more competent speakers' perception of mistakes by other speakers that led her to distinguish semi-speakers from fluent speakers as a group (1981: 106f./117). Nevertheless, I have qualms as to the way an unavoidably pejorative term such as 'semi-speaker' concretises and over-emphasises what is simply a deficiency in competency, reifying it into an almost innate group attribute. The same, of course, could be said about my own emphasis on the contrast between learners and native speakers, but this distinction is more fundamental in nature than that between fully competent and fully deficient speakers, which is in the nature of a gradually sloping sliding scale.

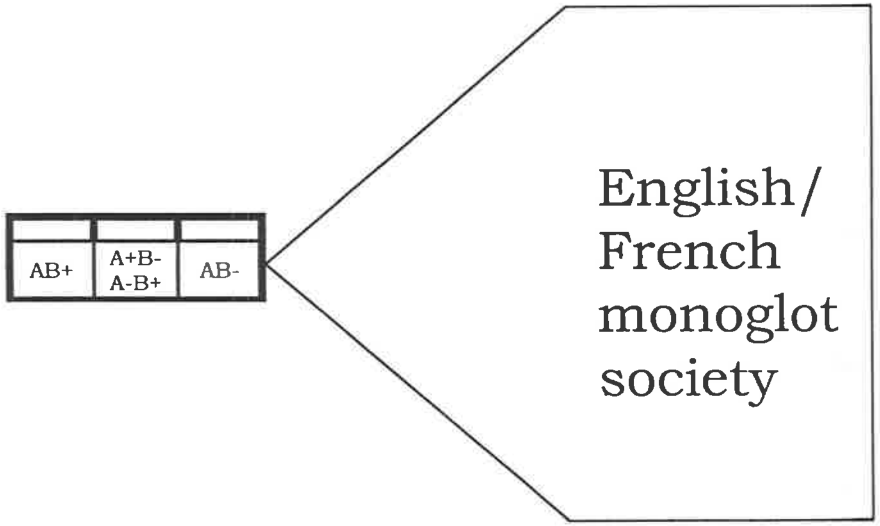
I am especially concerned with a tendency by commentators, who have not carried out careful long-term studies like Dorian, to use 'semi-speaker' as a blanket term for native speakers who have become less fluent in an environment where a language is on the wane (that is to say, more or less, all the remaining Celtic speaking areas). I prefer the use of the term 'intermediate speakers' in reference to most individuals in such environments who are usually perfectly fluent despite not always feeling comfortable in employing the language in all social situations.

I am even more uneasy with the term 'terminal speaker' popularised by Fleuriot in the 1980s in reference to the last generation of Breton speakers. It cannot be stressed enough that even if these Breton native speakers were 'terminal' inasmuch as they had not transmitted the language to their offspring, the adjective cannot then be applied to the quality of their speech which is in no appreciable way inferior to that of the native speakers of other languages who have transmitted their language to their offspring (see Hamp 1989, Humphreys 1990).

The problem with the distinction between 'semi-speakers' and 'fluent speakers' is that it gives too stadial a picture of the underlying reality; that is, it does not reveal the sliding scale of exposure that correlates to varying levels of competency. Also, language is a complex phenomenon and one a sign of any particular deficiency in the competency of the language itself. In a language like Welsh where most speakers can read, being illiterate might count as a deficiency, but does that make one a semi-speaker? The fact that the vast majority of Breton speakers have always been illiterate cannot by any means be taken to infer that Bretons have always been 'semi-speakers'.

There can be no doubt that the heightened sense of purism that accompanied the resurgence of the Celtic languages in contrast to the lack of native educational opportunities throughout most of the twentieth century has led to a growing feeling of deficiency on the part of the majority of native Celtic speakers. The gap between the literary language and their more colloquial registers generally sapped the confidence of these older speakers, deprived of native education, despite the fact that they, more often than not, had a better command of the spoken language than younger speakers living in a more Anglicised or Gallicised environment.

Figure 3.
Schematic illustration of pressures operating on the bilingual interface of the present-day



While some deficiency undoubtedly exists in the speech of contemporary Celtic native speakers, it is almost wholly governed by lack of use in society and in this context it must be pointed out that a straight comparison of the state of any Celtic language to well-known languages such as English or French would be injudicious. The contemporary societal disparity of any one Celtic language vis-à-vis the English or French languages, illustrated schematically in Figure 1, above, hardly conveys the pressure exerted by the 300 million or so English-speaking native speakers and the 80 million or so French-speaking native speakers throughout the globe against the million or so bilingual Celtic speakers.

This mismatch in numbers between languages leads to inevitable disparities in media production (literature, music, television), employment and travel opportunities. Added to this is the avoidable dominance of English/French as official languages with legal and constitutional priority in areas where Celtic speakers still form a majority (including those areas where the official hegemony has been challenged since the 1960s). Under these circumstances the direction of influence between the languages is basically unidirectional, from the powerful to the weak, from English/French to each individual Celtic language.

Faced with what is an obviously disintegrating society, learners can be somewhat loath to make efforts to integrate into a small and declining language group and may either abandon interest in the language or learn it in spite of the native speakers. There are signs of such tendencies in all the Celtic countries, and when a group of learners turns its back on the native speakers (as has happened in Brittany) and division emerges, we are justified in querying which of them best represents that particular historic language. It seems clear to me that this remains the prerogative of native speakers. Attempts to characterise the language of the learners as more Celtic than that of the native speakers, most usually because of their use of a number of literary words or neologisms based on Celtic roots, partake of a historical sleight of hand that conveniently ignores the evolulead to a situation where learners would so outnumber native-speakers that they would – by unintentional default – form the model of the language. That this does not yet seem to have happened in Ireland is due to the fact that the vast majority of the 900,000 or so learners do not actively use the language after school and have not affected the 100,000 or so native speakers scattered throughout the land as much as they might otherwise have done. In Ireland, the native model is by-and-large respected. In contrast, in Brittany the lack of contact between the 30,000 or so learners and the 250,000 native speakers, all past the age of being active in society, has divorced the language of the learners from that of the native speakers to the point that Le Dû (1997) suggests we are in reality dealing with two language systems. Wales, for the moment and for the foreseeable future, still has a healthy and numerous enough population of native speakers that it can absorb learners, though a continuing decline in traditional areas and the effects of the compulsory teaching of Welsh as a subject in all schools might in the long term lead to a situation similar to that found in Ireland.

It would be futile as well as a negative reaction to actively attempt to exclude people from learning a Celtic language. Certainly, wanting to learn a language – any language – can never be accounted a nefarious undertaking. It is generally a beneficial act, but vulnerable dominated languages should always be learned in a spirit of much curiosity and some humility. There can be no doubt that a number of learners have contributed exceptionally to the promotion of particular Celtic languages and Morgan (2000: 129) rightly emphasises that – whatever their competency – learners boost the market for Celtic language products and services and give the badly needed boost in numbers that justifies the quest for official support.

Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that mass production of learners through official education systems, in the absence of a native-speaking society able to hold its own, may only succeed in creating 'semi-competent' speakers who will dilute what is left of the Celtic-speaking societies; the

danger being that such speakers would approximate the 'form' without ever approaching the genuine 'content'. The question that will be heard more and more is how genuine are the remaining Celtic languages. At this eleventh hour, this – maybe – constitutes the best outcome native Celtic-speaking societies can realistically hope for. Perhaps it is not too much to anticipate that learners in acquiring fluency will continue, as much as is humanly possible, to improve their sensitivity and empathy vis-à-vis the native speakers and their societies which have carried the Celtic cultures into the twenty-first century. And, of course, one would also wish that native speakers take up their responsibility to welcome, encourage and help learners who show an interest in their language, but that is another story for another day ...

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