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Ideology and the learning of Celtic languages

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In this article I mean to investigate those ideological considerations that often show up amongst those attempting to learn the Celtic languages (namely Breton, Welsh, Irish, Scottish Gaelic). Those ideological considerations more particular to the native speakers of these languages are however, I believe, better treated under a separate rubric, that of 'identity'. For those unfamiliar with this part of the world it should be pointed out that the Celtic languages in question have seen an almost continual decline in the numbers of speakers since the nineteenth century but since the mid-to-late twentieth century their prestige has risen noticeably in their countries. The exceptional increases in the numbers of speakers – in the Republic of Ireland since the 1920s and more recently in Wales in the 1990s – are substantially 'paper increases' due to the establishment of these languages as a school subject and have yet to stem the global decrease in actual societal use. The receding nature of all Celtic languages as a societal phenomenon is the reason that the ideological considerations of those who attempt to learn these languages is of particular interest in contrast with those who attempt to learn stable and widespread official languages such as English, French, German etc.

Attitudes and motivations of learners

I think it is safe to postulate, that people, on the whole, do not learn languages disinterestedly out of solidarity with native speakers – for charitable purposes as it were – but have their

Throughout the ages people have often learnt other peoples' languages and that mostly in an oral environment. The significant increase in literacy and education that has characterised Europe and the world from the nineteenth century onwards and the concurrent societal reduction of the Celtic oral environment has led to a situation whereby it is common to learn a Celtic language in an educational setting or from books with minimal contact with the actual societies in which these languages are spoken. This leads to predictable consequences. Despite the fact that purism is a commonly enough recurring phenomenon whenever a particular language is felt to be under threat from another, purism tends to be particularly characteristic of learners, both in intensity and in form, as they have no inherent prior ability to distinguish colloquial from considered registers of speech in the target language which they have set out to learn. Until they live for a while in a Celtic-speaking environment, their *Sprachgefühl* is bound to be conditioned – whether by imitation or by contrast – with English, French, or whatever other language(s) they already possess.

I have touched upon the linguistic characteristics particular of learners of Celtic languages elsewhere (see Wmffre 2004: 158-63), but in the remainder of this article I would like to pay more attention to the ideological underpinnings that can characterise learners of these languages. Commentators have often noted an attitudinal difference between passive and pragmatic native speakers against idealistic and militant learners and such a difference can be put down to the passion of the converted against the fatalism widespread amongst native speakers with regard to overcoming the overwhelming advantages enjoyed by the English or French languages.

Heritage and identitarian issues

As was explained above, the 'Celtic' countries of Brittany, Wales, Ireland, Scotland have only minority populations which continue to speak the traditional Celtic language associated with

these countries. Many of the inhabitants are anglicised or frenchified Celts to whom these languages can feel, in an abstract sense, a part of their heritage, their identity. It is clear however that this feeling of the Celtic languages as heritage languages also affects many people of non-Celtic origin who live in these 'Celtic' countries, whether English, (English-)Scots or French, and whether their families have lived there from time immemorial or have immigrated there in more recent times.

A common sentiment among 'identitarian' learners is that the Celtic language to be learnt was *theirs* irrespective of whether they had competence or not in it. Robert Fullerton (1879-1938), a Republican Catholic priest and an enthusiastic learner of Irish, wrote in 1914:

> I feel proud that, notwithstanding all the handicaps, I can read with ease and appreciate with pleasure the language of my country, that I can converse, after a fashion, in my native tongue; and this, I think, helps to improve me … But first and above all, the Irish language brought me into living contact, as it were, with the Ireland of the past; it gave me a new and altogether different outlook on life, rather should I say, it restored to me a life I should never have lost and made me feel I was no longer a stranger in my own land. (Breathnach & Ní Mhurchú 1997: 63)

Here we find displayed pride and attachment to a country as well as a feeling of having intellectually improved. Note the contrast between Fullerton's claim that he could read "with ease" but could only converse "after a fashion" which seems to indicate that learning the language was not motivated in order to converse with and understand the native speakers. The Irish novelist James Plunkett's sentiment when visiting the Dingle peninsula, Co. Kerry:

> I felt that before I die I will speak my native language adequately enough to talk with those of my countrymen who have had it from birth, so that they won't shame me by having to change to English on my account. (quoted in Hunter 1986: 95)

> "there is in all but a tiny number of cases a clear divide between the 'learner', in the sense of someone who has elected to come to Gaelic, and the 'native' speaker of traditional background. No matter how fluent we learners may become, I am sure that there is always something in the turn of phrase and in the production of sounds that will, in protracted communication, give the game away to the native speaker."

Such comments are indicative of the fear learners can experience of the impossibility of integrating wholly in the native speaker society. But if integration may prove difficult, it is not impossible, as Owen Hugh's reassuring response to Lieutenant Yolland in Friel's play indicates: "You can learn to decode us." (Friel 1981: 40). One suspects integration depends as much on the mindset of the learner as it does on that of the native speakers.

Of course, grumpy, impolite and cliquey individuals are found in any society, which is not to deny the discouragement and negative impression meeting such an individual may leave on a struggling learner. Nevertheless, it seems that non-reciprocating the learners' attempts in the native language is common even amongst sociable native speakers. However, it may be worth considering that the disenchantment of learners at not being reciprocated by native speakers may be heightened by naïve expectations of how language functions in society. First of all, most native speakers speak for reasons of communication and will usually judge their own ability in English/French as better than the ability of the learner in the Celtic language. A slight discrepancy of linguistic features by the learner – be they lexical, syntactic or due to pronunciation – may be enough to decide the native speaker to switch to the dominant language (and we should perhaps not be too ready to judge them for that as it may well be that the last learner whom they met, who displayed similar linguistic discrepancies, gave them a harrowing and socially painful quarter of an hour). For Irish enthusiasts the language itself becomes the raison-d'être for communication in the language whereas native speakers are more pragmatic (Kabel 2000: 134-35) but for ordinary people, the truth of the matter seems to be that socialising in a pleasant manner is the goal as they are certainly not paid to be patient language teachers.

Another reason that native speakers can be reluctant to use their language is apprehension as to the acceptability of their own speech. Such feelings are directly attributable to the fact that few native speakers received a rounded education in their language and thus they feel at a disadvantage when confronted by learners who have access to learning in that language. An official of a Welsh learners' organisation pointed to lack of confidence amongst native speakers as a problem in getting learners acquainted with them: "Oh, my Welsh isn't good enough." (*O dyw Nghymraeg i ddim digon da.*) (B. Jones 1994: 15), Löffler (2000: 517) also elicited this reason from an Aberaeron informant: "They are afraid that the learners' Welsh is better than their Welsh." (*Ma' 'da nhw ofan bod Cymraeg y dysgwyr yn well na Cymraeg nhw*). Conversely Welsh adult learners felt shy with native speakers and more at home with other learners (Löffler 2000: 515, 520) and this phenomenon is also reported for Irish speakers by Kabel (2000: 136). It is not only native speakers who demonstrate some reluctance to speak to learners, Maguire (1991: 145-46) noted that advanced learners in Belfast were impatient with the efforts of novice learners whilst the latter could perceive the Shaws Road revived Gaelic community as very exclusive, even snobbish. Maguire ascribes this characterisation of the Shaws Road people as due to misinterpretation by timid novice learners, since the Shaws Road people too not only had learnt as adults but also provided classes in their homes.

Trosset (1986: 188) reports that some Welsh learners felt they had to conceal their learner background to blend in with native speakers. In the same vein, Youenn Olier, a Breton learner, explained that in the late 1940s, in order not to perplex the people of Douarnenez too much with his literary Breton, resorted to telling them that he and his friends were from Léon, another region (Olier 1990b: 113). These last two examples are not directly due to problems of communication but reveal the novelty for native speakers of dominated and neglected lan-

are inherently inappropriate concepts when applied to a language (which, if it is to flourish, must have as wide an application as possible as a medium of communication), people do relate identity to language and in a social setting identity – of musts – revolves around inclusive and exclusive definitions. The 'identification', 'affiliation' or 'special association' with a particular language becomes all the stronger if that language is under pressure from contact with another language and feelings of exclusive appropriation develop concerning the language in question. That native speakers can feel possessive about their language is hardly surprising, but what is perhaps more surprising is that such feelings are also held by non-speakers who identify with the Celtic languages, if only to emphasise their distance from English/French culture.

There are indications that not a few 'heritage' learners are not prepared to accept outsiders as learners of what they perceive as their language. A communication on an internet forum by *Cailín, a young Ireland-born woman (who had been learning Irish since the age of five but admitted that she was not very good at it) led to the most extended debate on the forum of *Daltaí na Gaeilge*, the American association of learners of Irish (there were 71 contributions compared to the 65 of the next most popular subject 'Translation help please!') (24.11.2001 <www.daltai.com>). Concerning the theme 'I'm an unhappy Irish person', *Cailín wrote:

> It would annoy me to see other people trying to learn it who aren't Irish. It may sound selfish and petty but that's my point of view because it seems to me that the average white American or Canadian thinks they are culture-less and so, they say 'Well my great grandad is Irish so I'll go back to my roots.' Your roots are American. You are not Irish. / I'm sorry if this seems rude but I can't help my opinion. It's *my* heritage, *my* culture and *my* language. It's like a whiteman pretending to be black. / … I think it's great that you're interested in learning it and I would do nothing to stop it but I just feel like you've stolen something.

To the expected riposte of American and Australian learners who also claimed the Irish language as *their* heritage because they were of Irish descent, there came added testimony that Ireland-born learners showed a certain resentment at overseas-born learners. *Seosamh Mac Bhl. (26.11.2001), a teacher of Irish, wrote:

> It's disconcerting to some Irish people to go to an Irish summer course and find that many (occasionally most) of the students are from outside Ireland. … To some degree I can understand discomfort with all this.

*Seosamh (an American contributor to the debate) had noticed that during the last twenty years they had been learning Irish that:

> Churlishness amongst Irish speakers concerning foreigners who speak Irish is growing. This, of course, means Americans (as well as Canadians). … On top of it all Japanese, Swedes and – gasp – Americans are learning it. Tinkers in the garden that had been neglected for years. … That is a challenge to the ownership [of Irish] some Ireland-born people (*Éireannaigh*) claim for themselves. (*Tá doicheall ag fás i measc lucht na Gaeilge roimh eachtrannaigh a bhfuil Gaeilge acu. Ciallaíonn sin Meiriceánaigh (Ceanadaigh san áireamh), ar ndóigh. … Mar bharr ar an donas tá Seapánaigh, Sualannaigh agus – gasp – Meiriceánaigh á foghlaim. Tincéirí sa ghairdín nár tugadh aon aird air le blianta. … Sin dúshlán don úinéireacht a éilíonn cuid de na hÉireannaigh dóibh féin.*) (25.11.2001) It is an unhealthy tendency. An Irish stranger attacked me fiercely on the subway because of the interest I had in Irish. '*You*'re not Irish' the poor creature shouted again and again, his voice and his anger growing more intense with each passing moment until we entered the station and off he went. … Such 'ownership' of culture is evil and ugly, every bit as poisonous amongst the small nations as it is in the great 'imperial' countries. (*Claonadh mífholláin atá ann. D'ionsaigh strainséir Éireannach mé go fiochmhar ar an subway as suim a bheith agam sa Ghaeilge. 'You're not Irish' a scairt an créatúr bocht arís agus arís, níos deirge leis an fhuath agus leis an fhearg le gach nóiméad gur tháinig an traein isteach ina stáisiúnsa agus d'imigh sé. … Bíonn an 'úinéireacht' cultúrtha sin olc gránna, achan phioc chomh nimhneach i measc na náisiún beag agus atá sé ag na tíortha móra 'impiriúla'.*) (25.11.2001)

all. Ganeoc'h emañ gwirionez ar yezh, hengoun ar bobl, ha me oar-me … Hanter-kant vloaz 'zo, da nebeutañ, e lavarit deomp pezh a dlefemp pe ne dlefemp ket ober, ha dreist-holl pegen fall eo hor brezhoneg. Daoust da se e kendalc'homp da labourat, sioul hag uvel, dre ma ouzomp mat n'oc'h ket perc'hennet war ar yezh-se a garomp hag hon eus, ni, desket dre garantez, a-wechoù gant kalz a boan. Legadet eo bet deomp koulz ha deoc'h-c'hwi. Brav eo deoc'h dispenn hag ober goap, met daoust ha ne soñj ket deoc'h e vefe spletusoc'h un tamm mat diskouez deomp penaos ober. / Padal, pelec'h 'ta emañ ho labourioù lennegel a dalvoudegezh, deomp d'o studiañ evit hor brasañ mad? … Pelec'h emañ ar Bennoberenn, an Oberenn Veur, glan ha peurglok, a roio tro deomp da c'houzout erfin petra eo brezoneg mat? Kaer am eus klask, ne welañ netra …) (Desbordes 1986: 40)

The passivity of the native speaker as against the militantism of the learner is particularly obvious in Brittany, but not so much in Ireland or Wales since the sheer number of pupils learning Irish or Welsh through state schools are passive rather than self-motivated. Löffler (2000: 518) found that despite a 90% knowledge of Welsh amongst the 5-15 age group in Aberaeron in the mid-1990s, there remained a tangible difference in the use of the language between native speakers and learners, the former being more active, the latter more passive. Löffler (2000: 504) observed a similar pattern in Fishguard and concluded that 'the relationship between linguistic ability and language use becomes especially tenuous in the case of second-language speakers.'

Mistrust's extremes: 'learners declare independence from the natives'

As early as 1906, Patrick Pearse had noticed and criticised the mistrust which existed in the Gaelic League between learners and native speakers (though he added that it also existed between districts and provinces as well) (Ó Conaire 1986a: 32). The attestation of such tensions earliest in Ireland is only to be expected since it is in that country that the collapse of the numbers of Celtic speakers occurred earliest, which facilitated the emergence of learners as a 'visible' group. Subsequently, during the twentieth century, learners and native speakers have established a fairly satisfactory modus vivendi. In Wales, a relatively healthy body of speakers has meant that until recently learners were not very numerous or visible, though this may be about to change.

It is in Brittany that mistrust between learners and native speakers developed its most extreme manifestation. This was in the first place due to the low literacy level and weak ethnic consciousness of the Bretons, exacerbated by the less tolerant attitude of the French government compared to that displayed by the British government to its Celtic minorities. Secondly, the centralising nature of the French state facilitated the emergence of leaders connected with Paris and Rennes rather than with the language heartland in western Brittany. In 1925, François Cadic, priest and organiser of Breton cultural life in Paris, a Breton regionalist, after having come across some of the Breton nationalist students who were in Paris, attacked the:

> clans of Neo-Bretons born in the towns, whose parents had for generations renounced the national language and who, seized by some impetuous love of the smaller homeland [i.e. Brittany], began loading a bookish Breton into their brains and to distribute certificates of Bretonness to whomsoever they fancied (*clans de néo-Bretons nés dans les villes, dont les parents depuis des générations avaient renoncé à la langue nationale et qui, saisis soudain d'un amour fougueux pour la petite patrie, se sont mis à se barbouiller la cervelle d'un breton livresque et à distribuer des brevets de bretonnisme à qui bon leur semble.*) (Postic 1997: 64).

He reiterated the same theme in the following year (Postic 1997: 64) when he accused:

> that squad of Janissaries mixed-bloods and foreigners, come from one does not know where, from the cities, who have constituted themselves, through personal calling, some years since, as the guardians of the national language (*cet escadron de Janissaires, sangs-mêlés et étrangers, venus on ne sait d'où, des grandes villes, qui se sont constitués, de par mission personnelle, voilà quelques années, les gardiens de la langue nationale.*)

Conclusion

Since the disappearance of the last noticeable remnants of monoglot speakers which occurred about the 1960s the teaching of Celtic languages has mostly been a question of integration and identification rather than one of pure communication. It is true that learners, by and large, often have an idealised view of Celtic culture which is opposed – and should always be different in one way or another – to the majority English/French culture, whilst native speakers often tend to be fatalistic and passive as regards the promotion of their tongue. This native speaker attitude is in origin a pragmatic view that proceeds from an intimate knowledge of their own societies' weaknesses and the strength of pro-English/French sentiment that they know would be unleashed by any move on their part to change the status quo by seeking to promote the native language. Thus there is a discrepancy between the militant idealism common to learners and the passive capitulation common to most of the native speakers that has helped give rise to a learners' variety of the Celtic language, which is most obvious in Ireland and in Brittany, where native speakers are the minority amongst those involved in militant endeavours.

I shall invite unpopularity by contending that the justified interrogation as to the artificiality of the United Kingdom or France as cultural units – advocated by the overwhelming majority of Celtic cultural activists – should also be extended to the 'Celtic' lands themselves. The geographical 'Celtic' identity has repercussions to our discussions of learners, and I shall stress, again, that the division between learners according to whether they come from a Celtic country or from without is – in practical terms – an ideological construct that disregards societal realities, and that an English-monoglot learner from a Celtic country is basically as foreign to the culture of Celtic speakers as would be a learner from England. In defence of my analysis, from those who cherish political unity and who might interpret it as divisive, I can only say that this division exists and is fundamentally implied in the traditional cultural viewpoint of both Celtic and non-Celtic speakers of those countries.

Bobi Jones (1993: 20) describes the excitement of learning Welsh as "regaining the language", but this was a language which he had never previously employed. It is at this point that the unstated ideology that assumes that a person's identity runs in the blood becomes palpable – for what else except a metaphysical spirit could account for the magical transmission? Such a belief is as comfortable for those learners whose ancestors were Welsh as it is uncomfortable to those who have English ancestry but who wish to learn Welsh in order to integrate into Welsh society. Thus concerning identity: the native speakers stress competency in the language, excluding – it is true – those who are less than competent, whereas in contrast 'heritage' learners often stress biological descent which excludes many who might want to integrate into Celtic-speaking society. It hardly needs emphasising which definition of identity is the most restrictive.

Notes

[1] The following citations are all from Wmffre *Breton Orthographies and Dialects*, forthcoming.

[2] Mordrel was married to a native speaker, but Malo Mordrelle his son, born in 1928 revealed that: "He only spoke literary Breton and forbade that we speak dialect at home. As he did not have the time to teach us the 'great language' we always spoke French!" (*Il ne parlait que le breton littéraire et interdisait qu'on parle à la maison le dialecte. Comme il n'avait pas le temps de nous apprendre la 'grande langue', on a toujours parlé le français!*)