A Brief Overview of the Irish Language

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Irish, otherwise known as Gaelic, is one of the oldest languages in the world to have been well documented. It was first recorded in the fourth century in Ogham form, an early writing system of Irish. Irish is commonly referred to as *Gaelic*, however this has been deemed incorrect by speakers of the language. *Gaelic* should be used to refer to Scottish Gaelic while *Irish* should be used to refer to the Irish language. This confusion seems to have arisen because the Irish word for *Irish* is *Gaeilge*, which can be pronounced as *Gaelic* in some dialects (Devlin, 2020). The first speakers of the language likely arrived in Ireland over 2,500 years ago after traveling from mainland Europe (*History of the Irish Language*, n.d.). Some of the speakers then continued to travel onward to Scotland and the Isle of Mann, creating the sister languages of Irish: Scottish Gaelic and Manx. Thus, these languages are mutually intelligible on a cline. Irish is a member of the Goidelic branch of Celtic languages and is overall a part of the Indo-European language family. It is distantly related to its Brythonic cousins, the other branch of Celtic languages. These cousins include Welsh, Cornish, and Breton. Irish is spoken in the Republic of Ireland (Ireland), Northern Ireland, Scotland, the west coast of Britain, and the Isle of Mann.

Ireland has undergone many historical, social, and political changes that have contributed to the decline in the use of Irish. The earliest form of Irish was found to be etched onto Ogham stones, dating back to around the 4th century CE. Over time, Irish evolved as it came into contact with different languages. Old Irish was developed between the 8th and 12th centuries, then evolved into Middle Irish between the 12th and 15th centuries (Devlin, 2020). During the 12th century, Anglo Normans began settling in Ireland, causing a period of multilingualism in Ireland. However, the Irish language remained superior to the language of the Anglo Normans. Thus, the Normans ultimately spoke Irish as it became the lingua franca. There is influence in the Irish language that stemmed from the contact with the Anglo Normans. Some words that they

introduced include but are not limited to *giúistís* to mean ‘justice’, *cúirt* to mean ‘court’, and *garsún* to mean ‘boy’. From the 12th century to the 17th century, Classical Modern Irish was not the spoken language, but instead a “cultivated standardised language developed in the lay schools for scholars and poets throughout Ireland and Scotland” (*History of the Irish Language*, n.d.). The spoken language at the time was Early Modern Irish, but there were multiple changes to it throughout the period (*History of the Irish Language*, n.d.). Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, Ireland was always fending off British invaders, but they were eventually overthrown due to the British majority in the Irish parliament. In 1801, under the Union with Ireland Act, Ireland and England were merged to create the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. At this point, Irish was no longer the lingua franca of Ireland and became a minority language. In the 19th century, the English tried to eliminate the Irish language by enforcing English in schools, church, and the government. This led to bilingualism in Ireland: “English was used by officials and members of the upper class, and Irish was used by the regular people” (Devlin, 2020). Irish continued to be used by the rural population and by the working classes in towns. After the middle of the 18th century, laws relaxed and native Irish people were able to enjoy better social and economic mobility. The Irish language came close to extinction during this time as “more prosperous members of the Irish-speaking community began to adopt an Anglicized way of life and to take up English” (*History of the Irish Language*, n.d.). During and after the Great Famine, this phenomenon increased, causing the decline of spoken Irish.

The language was revitalized at the start of the 18th century when scholars started to take interest in it. Many people began to declare Irish as a national language. This sentiment was reflected in the 1922 and 1937 constitutions. In 1876, the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language was established. They were able to raise awareness for Irish and gain recognition for it

at every level of Ireland's education system. In 1893, the Gaelic League was established. They created a mass movement in support of the Irish language, leading to a call to level the grammar of written Irish with the spoken modern language. This resulted in the Official Standard, a document outlining the standard for the grammar and spelling of Irish, being published by the Government of Ireland in 1958. In 1937, in a revised Constitution, Irish was designated as the first official language of Ireland due to its status as a national language. English is recognized as the second official language of Ireland (An Coimisinéir Teanga, n.d.). In 2022, Irish "gained full status as an official language of the European Union" (*Irish Gains Full Status*, n.d.). Despite these revitalization efforts and having government support, Irish is still on a decline.

According to the Ethnologue, Irish is classified as an endangered language, meaning it is heading towards a moribund status of endangerment. Though there are quite a few speakers of the language, there is not much transmission happening between parents and their children. When transmission between generations ceases, a language begins to be critically endangered. The transmission between generations is such a vital component to keeping languages alive because it is a natural way for an individual to learn a language. Speaking a language as a mother tongue helps to keep it thriving as households pass down their traditions and culture through the language. As mentioned above, there have been revitalization efforts in an attempt to increase the number of speakers of Irish, thereby increasing transmission. One such attempt is the Gaelic Revival, a movement that began in 1853. The Gaelic Revival not only revitalized the Irish language, it also focused on renewing Irish culture. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was founded in 1884, renewing support of Irish sports such as hurling and Gaelic football. The Gaelic League was a prominent leader in the revival, publishing newspapers and other literature written in Irish. Both the Gaelic League and GAA were passionate about reviving culture and the

language, attempting to remain apolitical in their commentary during the political unrest of the time.

The Gaeltacht is an additional attempt at preserving the Irish language. Of the estimated 1.2 million speakers of Irish, only about 170,000 people speak it as their first language (Devlin, 2020). Gaeltacht are the regions of Ireland where Irish is spoken as a first language or is the "primary spoken language of the majority of the community" (*The Gaeltacht*, n.d.). These regions are recognized by the government and successive governments have recognized that "particular legislation, structures and funding are required to ensure the viability of the Gaeltacht communities" (*The Gaeltacht*, n.d.). One of the organizations responsible for maintaining the development of the Gaeltacht is Údarás na Gaeltachta. Their primary focus is to "strengthen the Irish language as the primary community language" (*The Gaeltacht*, n.d.) in the Gaeltacht regions. As a part of the Gaelic Revival, the Gaeltacht regions were recognized by the government in 1926. The Gaeltacht regions are located near the coastal areas of the country because historically, "the west was seen as poorer, as the land was harder to farm" (Tockston, 2023). Along with six of Ireland's inhabited islands, the Gaeltacht regions include counties Donegal, Mayo, Galway, and Kerry along with sections of counties Cork, Meath, and Waterford (*The Gaeltacht*, n.d.). Údarás na Gaeltachta also has language planning and initiatives set in place to help spread the Irish language. The language planning processes "aim to strengthen the Irish language as a household language and a community language" (*Language Planning*, n.d.), essentially seeking to increase transmission between generations. They hope to do this by "implementing language plans in recognised areas to increase the use of Irish in certain areas in the community – e.g. in the family, among the youth, in the education system, in the business sector and in the public sector" (*What Is Language Planning?*, n.d.). The language initiatives

encourage adults to take advantage of the 30 centers in the Gaeltacht that will help them to learn Irish (*Language Services Centres*, n.d.). Through 100 preschools established in the Gaeltacht, one of the initiatives introduces children to Irish at a young age so that they can grow to speak it more often (*Pre-schools*, n.d.). There is also an initiative that promotes the use of Irish in community activities as well as cultural and art events (*Language Supports*, n.d.). Furthermore, there is a government effort to revitalize the language. In 2010, the Government of Ireland launched the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language*. The government strives to "ensure that as many citizens as possible are bilingual in both Irish and English", with close attention to Irish's "viability as a household and community language in the Gaeltacht" (Government of Ireland, 2010).

The combined efforts of these revitalization tactics have unfortunately not been successful thus far. Since 2016, census results show that the number of daily speakers of Irish has been decreasing. In 2016, 73,803 daily speakers of Irish were recorded but in 2022, it fell to 71,968 speakers. However, there was an increase in people with the ability to speak Irish. In 2022, the number reached 1,873,997 people, a 6% increase from the 1,761,420 people in 2016. In the Gaeltacht, the number of people who speak Irish daily outside of the education system fell from 16,199 people in 2016 to 15,360 people in 2022 (Caollaí, 2023). Much of the decline is due to lack of transmission, globalization, and lack of motivation. Irish is culturally significant, but it does not hold as much weight as English does in a global context. Therefore, this leads parents to focus more on teaching their children English because it will come into use in the long term. Additionally, language learning is time consuming and difficult. It is hard to motivate people into devoting time to a language that they are not guaranteed to use every day. Despite this, the government will continue with their 20 year strategy with further approved language plans "in

respect of Gaeltacht language planning areas, three Irish language networks and three Gaeltacht service towns" (Moloney, 2021).

These efforts have allowed Irish to survive thus far, allowing speakers to connect to their ancestors through the language. Additionally, the use of Irish as the lingua franca in Gaeltacht regions has allowed a strong traditional arts culture to develop. The people of Gaeltacht are known for their song, dances, and crafts, and are thriving and growing in the business world. Allowing the Irish people to be multilingual has allowed for them to preserve their culture in a unique way, thus the Irish speaking communities must be protected so as to not lose a piece of their history (*The Gaeltacht*, n.d.).

As previously mentioned, the first instance of Irish is in Ogham form, the oldest existing record of written Irish. Ogham is an alphabetic writing system with one symbol equivalent to one sound. Ogham uses four sets of notches, and each set contains five letters that are composed of one to five strokes, thus giving 20 letters. These were carved on the edge of a stone either vertically or from right to left (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). Now, Irish is written in the Latin alphabet, also an alphabetic writing system. Similar to Ogham, one symbol is equivalent to one sound. Irish also makes use of grammatical gender with each noun being assigned a gender (Christian Brothers, 1906, Chapter II). The word order of Irish follows a verb-subject-object order. This property is less common cross linguistically with only 94 other languages sharing this word order (*WALS Online - Language Irish*, n.d.). It follows the Head-Directionality parameter in that the verb comes before the object. This means it is a head initial language.

When analyzing languages, it is not possible to categorize them into just one parameter. Parameters exist on a cline as do languages. This applies to Irish too. Keeping this in mind, Irish is a highly synthetic, concatenative, separative, and flexive language.

In terms of synthesis, Irish can be described as synthetic, analytic, and compounding. There are three word classes in Irish: simple, derivative, and compound. All simple words are generally monosyllabic as they act as the stems for derivative and compound words. However, simple words can still stand by themselves. This is similar to an analytic language where one stem is equal to one word. Derivative words are composed of two or more simple words and particles that undergo changes when they are compounded to form new words. For example, ᴛɲom means 'heavy' and can stand by itself. ᴛɲomaɾ means 'heaviness' or 'weight'. It is composed of ᴛɲom+aɾ wherein ·aɾ is a suffix that gives the abstract termination. Many words in Irish are formed this way with the affixation of morphemes to simple words to create new words. This is similar to a synthetic language where one word is equal to one stem plus one or two more morphemes. Adjectives are formed this way by adding suffixes to nouns. Verbs are also formed this way by adding the suffix Iġ or UIġ to nouns and adjectives. Compound nouns are formed by joining two or more simple nouns. For instance, caṫ means 'a battle' and báɲɲ means 'head' or 'top'. Together, they form caṫ-ḃaɲɲ meaning 'helmet'. This quality is similar to a compounding language where two or more lexical items join to create a new word with a new meaning.

Irish's word formation process also shows that, fusionally, it is a concatenative language as it utilizes affixation and compounding to form new words. Additionally, the word formation process shows Irish's exponence is separative. Each morpheme that is encoded in the words

carry one piece of information. When forming adjectives, Irish attaches suffixes to nouns. However, there is a different suffix for each type of adjective one is trying to form. For example, aċ or eaċ are used to form an adjective that signifies 'full of' or 'abounding in'. Thus, the following occurs (Christian Brothers, 1906, Chapter X).

Noun	Adjective
feanɡ 'anger'	feanɡaċ 'angry'
clú 'fame'	clúiteaċ 'famous'

This process is quite common. It happens in English as well. There are certain suffixes that are reserved for certain meanings. To illustrate, the suffix *-ful* is used to transform nouns into adjectives that describe the quantity of the noun.

Noun	Adjective
beauty	beautiful 'to be full of beauty'
fright	frightful 'to be full of fright'

Lastly, in terms of flexivity, Irish is highly flexive. Morphemes change depending on the context and function they are serving. Irish has about five declensions. It is not universally agreed upon that there are only five, but it is usually treated as such. A declension is when the form of a word changes to express its syntactic function in a sentence, usually through inflection. In Irish, a declension is a group of nouns that form the plural and genitive forms according to a common pattern (*Irish Noun Declensions - Nualéargais*, n.d.). All nouns of the first declension are masculine and end in a broad consonant. The genitive is formed by adding an *i* after the last broad vowel. The second declension contains all feminine nouns and can end in broad or slender

consonants. The genitive is formed by adding *e* and the plural is formed by adding *a* or *e*. The third declension includes all masculine personal nouns, all feminine derived nouns, and other nouns that end in consonants whose gender is determined according to if they end in broad or slender consonants. The genitive is formed by adding *a*. The same goes for the plural, but personal nouns that end in óir must add í or ide. The fourth declension includes all masculine personal nouns in aire, aide, uide, aigh, masculine diminutives in ín, abstract derivatives that are formed from the genitive singular feminine of adjectives, and all nouns ending in vowels that are not part of the fifth declension. The genitive and plural are generally formed by adding í, ide, or ada. The fifth declension includes nouns ending in vowels and are mostly feminine. The genitive is formed by adding a broad consonant and the plural is formed by adding *a* to the genitive (Christian Brothers, 1906, Chapter II).

Overall, Irish is an endangered language that is potentially on its way to stabilization. With the efforts of the government, it is possible that in the future, Irish will be healthily transmitted between generations. If a child in Gaeltacht is attending a preschool where Irish is being introduced, their parent should also be attending a school and learning Irish so that they may work together to preserve the language. This facilitates the difficult nature of language learning as the child will have almost native proficiency and can instinctually produce the grammar of Irish. As seen above, Irish grammar is complex, but if the child has encoded knowledge of it, they will be able to help their parent with learning it. Hopefully, in a few years, the next census reports more daily speakers of Irish. It would be a shame for the language to go extinct after many years of perseverance through turbulent history.

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