

“YOU WOULDN’T THINK WE’D HAVE THAT MUCH
PROBLEMS SPEAKING OUR OWN LANGUAGE”

Irish university students’ attitudes towards their vernacular

Bachelor’s thesis
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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Tämä tutkielma pyrkii selvittämään irlantilaisten yliopisto-opiskelijoiden asenteita iirin kieltä kohtaan. Iiri on Irlannin kansallinen ja ensimmäinen virallinen kieli, ja sen opiskelu on peruskoulussa pakollista. Kuitenkin vain alle puolet irlantilaisista sanoo osaavansa iiriä ja alle kaksi prosenttia käyttää sitä päivittäin. Iiriin liittyvät asennetutkimukset ovat vanhentuneita, sillä uusin koko maan kattava tutkimus toteutettiin vuonna 1993. 2010-luvulla kaksi tutkijaa on tarkastellut irlantilaisten yliopisto-opiskelijoiden asenteita iirin kieleen, mutta nämä tutkimukset ovat määrällisiä ja jättävät aukon laadulliselle tutkimukselle, jotta määrällisissä tutkimuksissa saatuja tuloksia voitaisiin ymmärtää syvemmin. Edelliset tutkimukset osoittavat, että opiskelijat tahtovat säilyttää iirin kielen kulttuurissaan, mutta eivät oppineet sitä koulussa. Siksi tämä tutkielma tarkastelee yliopisto-opiskelijoiden suhtautumista pakolliseen iirinopetukseen, onko iirin kieli edelleen tärkeä osa kansallista identiteettiä ja mitä opiskelijat ajattelevat kansalliskielensä tulevaisuudesta.</p> <p>Aineisto kerättiin kahdessa teemahaastattelussa, joista toinen oli neljän englanninkielisen opiskelijan ryhmähaastattelu ja toinen englanninkielisen iirinopiskelijan yksilöhaastattelu. Haastattelut litteroitiin ja vastaukset ryhmiteltiin tutkielman kolmen alakysymyksen mukaisesti osioihin. Analyysissä yhdisteltiin aineisto- ja teorialähtöisiä malleja. Niiden avulla saatiin selville, että opiskelijoiden asenteissa ja motivaatiossa on selkeä ristiriita. Tutkielma osoittaa, että asenteet iiriä kohtaan ovat positiivisia, mutta motivaatio opiskella sitä on huono. Siksi tutkielmassa ehdotetaan, että laajamittainen tutkimus iirin tilanteesta Irlannissa olisi tarpeen, mikäli maa toivoo jatkossakin pysyvän edes nimellisesti kaksikielisenä.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Recently two people were having a conversation in Irish in the middle of Dublin. Another Irish man walked past them and, not recognising the sound of his country's national language, shouted in English, "Go back where you came from!"

The Irish language is the vernacular of Ireland, and was once the only language spoken on the island. The status and knowledge of the language have continued to decline and at the moment only a small fraction of the Irish people are fluent Irish-speakers. Research shows that Irish people regard the vernacular as an important part of their cultural heritage (Moriarty 2010; O'Rourke 2011; Ó Riagáin 1997). However, although Bunreacht na hÉireann¹ (1937) states that "the Irish language as the national language is the first official language" and Irish is mandatory in schools, less than half of the Irish people claim that they can speak Irish and under two per cent use the language daily outside the education system, according to Census 2011 (Census 2011 reports 2012).

Although there are some studies on language attitudes in Ireland available, they are either dated or focused on describing language attitudes through quantitative methods, and they do not aim to understand the reasons behind the numbers. Recently researchers Moriarty (2010) and O'Rourke (2011) studied Irish university students' attitudes towards their vernacular. These studies show that Irish is a part of the students' national identity, but there is still a lack of interest to learn it properly. However, there is a need for qualitative studies and, therefore, the present study seeks to find answers for the questions the previous research raises. The present study is qualitative, using a loosely structured interview as the data collection method. The questions overlap with those of O'Rourke and Moriarty as the aim is to find out reasons behind the percentages and to tie the results together with previous research on language attitudes, motivation and the history of the Irish language.

¹ The Irish constitution

2 LANGUAGE ATTITUDES IN IRELAND

2.1 Language, motivation and identity

According to Fasold (2006: 375), the language or dialect in which we speak functions as a social identity marker, as it ties us to one group while distances us from others. This function of speech matters to governments since social identity is closely linked with loyalty, and it is important for governments to know to whom their citizens are loyal. Fasold describes Joshua Fishman's classic definitions for national and official languages. *Nationalism* has to do with the identity of a people and how they understand themselves as a separate group. *Nationism* is related to governing; therefore a *nationist* or *official language* is the language of, for instance, administration, legislation and education. As Fasold (2006: 377) puts it, "a national language is like the national flag. Its value is more symbolic than functional. A nationist or official language is comparable to the national railroad."

According to Dörnyei (1998: 117-118), sufficient motivation is a crucial factor in good accomplishments related to language learning. Appropriate curricula and teaching alone cannot guarantee good results although high motivation can compensate for deficiencies in learning conditions. Motivation for L2 learning cannot directly be compared with the motivational basis of other subject matters since an L2 is not only about language but about culture, about 'L2 identity'. In other words, motivation to learn the Irish language is different from motivation to learn mathematics or biology, as the language separates the Irish people from their old ruler Britain.

As research such as Mantle-Bromley's (1995: 373) suggests, attitudes towards an L2, language teachers, the speakers of the language and social class all play an important part in student achievement. It is, therefore, not surprising that Moriarty (2010: 146) found an apparent correlation between attitudes towards and ability in the Irish language. According to Mantle-Bromley (1995: 383), teachers play a crucial role in language learning as without their efforts students' attitudes may become more

negative. The data shows that language teachers must be aware of students' attitudes and include attitude-changing methods in their classes.

2.2 The past and present of the Irish language

The Anglo-Norman invasion in the 12th century is frequently seen as a turning point in the status of the Irish language (Ó Riagáin 1997: 4). The invasions had little direct effect on the population whose lingua franca continued to be Irish, but long term effects were more substantial. Irish continued to be the language of history, grammar, law, place-name lore, genealogy, medicine and poetry, but English was now the formal language of administration and governance. In the 16th century Henry VIII established the Act for the English Order, Habit and Language which decreed that all Irish people were to speak the English language. There was an English school in every parish and parents were required to bring up their children speaking English. During the Tudor campaigns in the 17th century Irish aristocratic families were dispossessed and replaced by relatively large numbers of Englishmen, who took their place as the new landlord class in Ireland. Because of these developments, English had prestige and attitudes towards Irish were increasingly negative. (O'Rourke 2011: 36-7; Ó Riagáin 1997: 4.) Accordingly, Ireland underwent a top-down language shift where English was transferred from English landlords to Irish peasants.

Despite all the attempted reforms, because of the physical isolation of the rural Irish-speaking population, the language was sustained among the majority of the population up until the 18th century. However, Irish was now considered an old-fashioned, rural language of the poor and the uneducated, and the stigmatised status of Irish led to the abandonment of the language by the subsequent generations (O'Rourke 2011: 38-9; Ó Riagáin 1997: 3). The national education system established in 1831 was entirely in English. The Great Famine of 1845-9 killed one million Irish people and another 1.5 million emigrated. The Famine had the greatest impact on the poorer classes - that is, native Irish-speakers. (Ó Riagáin 1997: 5.) In the 1926

Census (Census 1926 reports 1932) only 18 per cent of the population in the Republic reported to be able to speak Irish and under one per cent of the population were monoglot Irish-speakers.

Romanticism in the 19th century underlay the ideology of the language revival movement. Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League) founded in 1893 was concerned with the revival of the Irish language and culture, and as the nationalist movement had begun, Irish was adopted as a symbol of national identity (O'Rourke 2011: 48). In 1922 Ireland got its political independence and under Article 4 of the Constitution of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann), Irish was proclaimed the "national" language. The position was reaffirmed in 1937 in Article 8 of Bunreacht na hÉireann (the Irish Constitution) which states that "the Irish language as the national language is the first official language". Irish was made compulsory in all standards in the national schools from St Patrick's Day 1922; from the school year 1927-28 it was a compulsory subject in the Intermediate Certificate and from 1934 in the Leaving Certificate examination (Kelly 2002: 18).

The government announced its policy on Irish in schools in early 1922. The ultimate objective was to gradually replace English with Irish as a medium of instruction. However, neither the teachers nor the pupils knew enough Irish for this to happen smoothly. The state gave an extra capitation grant for pupils being taught in Irish and a further incentive was provided through the allowance of extra marks to candidates who answered public examination papers through the vernacular. By the late 1930s around 25-30 per cent of secondary schools taught all subjects through the medium of Irish. However, the 1950s saw a decline in numbers, and public opinion polls in the 1960s suggested that the policy of bilingual or all-Irish teaching was not popular. (Ó Riagáin 1997: 15-16, 20-21.)

By the 1960s the focus of policy had turned from promoting all-Irish or bilingual education to developing Irish as a separate subject. The 1970s saw substantial changes in the social and economic organisation of Irish society. Ireland urbanised at a growing pace and numbers taking part in second and third level education

increased. In 1973 Ireland discontinued the policy of requiring students to pass the state exams in Irish in order to graduate with a certificate. (Ó Riagáin 1997: 23-4.)

According to Ó Riagáin (1997: 26), only about five per cent of the population used Irish in their home or at work in the 1990s. The language never ceased to be spoken in the Gaeltacht² areas and is still used in everyday life, but these communities only account for less than two per cent of the national population. Furthermore, Irish-speaking areas are scattered and fragmented, and many living in these areas do not use Irish. Irish is mainly spoken during school years but is often discontinued soon after that. According to Census 2011 (Census 2011 Reports 2012), 41.4 per cent of Irish people claim that they can speak the vernacular and only 1.8 per cent use Irish daily outside the education system.

According to Kelly (2002: 133), the policy of compulsion in schools made people reluctant to learn Irish “or at least turned enthusiasm for the revival into apathy”. He claims that the school-based revival failed, since the reasoning for all-Irish education was that it was “a matter of history”. Kelly claims that this was too nationalistic an analysis of history as evidence suggests that parents supported the anglicising influence of the school since the establishment of the national education system in 1831; neither does the analysis take into account the decline of use of Irish prior to 1831. Kelly (2002: 133-4) argues that blaming the schools for the decline served well the nationalist agenda of the first decades of the independence, but that it does not change the fact that the language policy of the early 20th century was unsuccessful and costly. However, Coady and Ó Laoire (2002: 155) claim that Gaelscoileanna³ are the only option, if Ireland aims to be bilingual again.

Kelly (2002: 134-5) lists problems concerning the compulsory Irish before 1973. He argues that when Irish was not only a compulsory subject in school and in the leaving certificate examinations, but also had to be passed, the language gained an

² Secondary school students have the possibility to go on a summer camp in one of the Irish-speaking areas. The camps are voluntary and organised by private companies, which means that they tend to be costly. In the Gaeltacht the students stay with Irish-speaking families and are usually only allowed speak in Irish.

³ Schools that use only Irish as the medium of instruction

unfavourable status it did not deserve in cultural or practical terms. According to him, the policy only created cynicism towards the language and occasionally “passionate dislike” for the vernacular and thus discredited the attempted language revival. Another problem concerning the teaching of Irish was the lack of qualified teachers, reading material, standardised spelling and grammar as well as suitable terminology in many subjects. This led to a situation where Irish was merely used as the medium of instruction, but English was used for practical purposes (such as lack of terminology in Irish). Therefore, as Kelly (2002: 136) states, “ideology was notably outpacing pragmatism”. Furthermore, there was a lack of opportunities to use Irish outside school (Kelly 2002: 103).

2.3 Irish language attitudes

Ó Riagáin (1997: 26) argues that “although there has indeed been some measures of revival and - - - the pattern of bilingualism has consequently shifted, the long-term future of the Irish language is no more secure now than it was sixty years ago”. He finds that it is the schools that are keeping the language alive, as a small minority continues to enjoy learning Irish and maintains its use in their lives. According to him, there is a mismatch between two very different aspects of preserving the Irish language: on the one hand, there is a strong relationship between the language and national identity, but, on the other hand, Irish has limited value as cultural capital (Ó Riagáin 1997: 26, 279). Although the majority of the Irish public wishes bilingualism to stay as a part of Irish society, most of these people seek at best to maintain the language in the Gaeltacht areas and in artistic life (Ó Riagáin 1997: 280). O'Rourke (2011: 134-5) notes that as a result of the general absence of political debate on the Irish language in Ireland, Irish people are unaware of the language attitudes of the people around them. According to her, this lack of debate leads to a paradoxical situation where Irish people can have strong personal and ideological commitment to the Irish language but believe to be on their own with those thoughts. Coleman (2010: 48) concludes that the decline of the Irish language was “more a case of

'language suicide' than 'language murder'" as the Irish people willingly let their vernacular die.

The first major sociological survey of the Irish public concerning the Irish language was conducted by the Committee on the Irish Language Attitudes Research (CILAR) in 1973, although a language question has been included in the Census of Population since 1851 (Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin 1994: 1). In 1975 Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann (ITÉ - the Linguistic Institution of Ireland) formally accepted the responsibility to maintain, replicate and develop the CILAR data-base in order to monitor trends in language behaviour and attitudes in Ireland and the study was to be replicated every ten years. However, the Institiúid was closed down in 2004 (Houses of the Oireachtas 2004) and, therefore, the most recent national survey on general language attitudes in Ireland available is the survey of 1993.

Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin (1994) report findings from Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann's National Survey on Languages of 1993 also showing what the results in the same survey had been in 1973 and 1983. According to the survey, over 60 per cent of the respondents agreed with the statement "Ireland would not really be Ireland without Irish-speaking people" and an increasing number of people were in favour for more money to be spent on reviving the Irish language, figures rising from 48 per cent in 1973 to 57 per cent in 1993. Around 40 per cent of the participants thought that using the Irish language would make Ireland more independent of England and over 70 per cent agreed that an Irish-speaker must have the right to expect civil servants to be able to speak Irish with them. Around 70 per cent of the participants believed that if nothing is done about it, Irish will disappear in a generation or two, and about the same number thought that people would speak Irish if it were taught better in the schools. In 1983 and 1993 the participants were asked whether it is more important that a child at school learns Irish than a foreign language; the number in favour for Irish dropped from 40 to 25 per cent in those ten years. Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin (1994: 22) note that although at least half of the population are still pessimistic and think of Irish as a backward, old-fashioned language, there has been a significant shift into a more positive direction. The researchers also point out that a

growing number believes that the government has a crucial role in saving the language, that it should have this role and that it should do everything it can even if it means increased expenditure of money (Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin 1994: 43).

O'Rourke (2011) conducted a study on Irish university students' attitudes towards the Irish language. In her cross-national study she asked Irish and Galician students to fill out a questionnaire concerning their attitudes towards their vernacular. She decided to carry out the survey in a university context and among university students arguing that according to previous research, young people's attitudes towards a minority language determine the direction towards which the position of the language will shift in the future (O'Rourke 2011: 117). The students in Dublin were aged between 18 and 24 and were found to be from predominantly middle class, mostly urban, backgrounds. 80 per cent of the respondents were from the eastern part of the country and over a half of them from Dublin. A significant problem in the study conducted by the Scottish researcher is that the Dublin area is fully English-speaking, and therefore the results cannot be generalised to represent the attitudes of the whole country's university students.

Most of the questions in O'Rourke's research were based on the ITÉ survey of 1973, 1983 and 1993 (Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin 1994; Ó Riagáin 1997). O'Rourke found out that 80 per cent of the students were against the suggestion that attempts to keep Irish alive are a waste of time and money and 31 per cent thought that Ireland would lose its distinctiveness as a cultural entity without Irish. However, only 38 per cent agreed that Irish is a suitable language for business, science and technology, 83 per cent saw Irish have little or no importance in their future careers and 89 per cent thought that Irish will never become the common means of communication in Ireland. Like in the ITÉ 1993 survey, over 60 per cent thought that Ireland would not really be Ireland without its Irish-speaking people, but at the same time only 36 per cent agreed that language is the most important part of the Irish identity. Furthermore, where half of the students favoured the transmission of the language in the home domain, only 32 per cent would teach their children Irish at home.

Moriarty (2010) studied university students' attitudes towards the Irish language in the University of Limerick and in her data over 80 per cent of the respondents agreed that Ireland would not be Ireland without its Irish-speaking people. Almost 90 per cent of the respondents in her research agreed or strongly agreed that they would like their children to speak Irish. It is noteworthy that the University of Limerick is located in the west-coast of Ireland, relatively near to some of Gaeltacht areas. Although the respondents in her research were all English-speakers, their attitudes were a great deal more positive than the students in O'Rourke's research, in which most of the respondents came from the east-coast of the island.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Research questions

The Irish have had a difficult relationship with their vernacular for centuries. Under the British rule its use was strongly discouraged, and although since the Republic got its independence attempts have been made to make Ireland once again bilingual, only a fraction of the Irish people uses the language in everyday life. Little research has been done on attitudes towards the Irish language since 1993. O'Rourke (2011) and Moriarty (2010) asked Irish university students about their attitudes towards the Irish language, but both of these studies focused on quantitative methods and therefore there is a gap for interview-based research. O'Rourke's and Moriarty's results are used as a starting point in the present study whose aim is to find out why Irish students think the way they do about their vernacular. The present study seeks answers to the following questions:

What are Irish university students' attitudes towards their vernacular?

- How strong a part of national identity is the Irish language for Irish university students?
- What are their attitudes towards Irish in comprehensive education?

- What are their thoughts on the future of the language?

3.2 Data collection

The purpose of the study was to find out why Irish students think of their language the way they do, using Moriarty's and O'Rourke's findings as the starting point. Since their studies are quantitative and the focus is on *what* rather than *why*, the aim of the present study was to go deeper into the numbers and find out more about some individuals' views as well as start a debate among them on the given topics (Dufva 2011: 132). Following the example of O'Rourke (2011) and using her reasoning, young university students were chosen as the focus group. Therefore four Irish students aged 21-23 from the University of Limerick were interviewed. They were chosen according to their language background: none of them had learned Irish at home, gone to a Gaelscoil or permanently lived in the Gaeltacht, but they were not from the exclusively English-speaking Dublin area either.

The interview was a loosely structured interview and all the participants were interviewed together so that they could brainstorm, debate and ask each other defining questions (Dufva 2011: 133; Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2002: 78-9). In the interview the students were first asked about their background: how well their parents speak Irish, what their parents' language attitudes are, how well the students performed in Irish at school and whether they had spent time in the Gaeltacht in secondary school. The sequential questions were related to their views on Irish in schools and the general state of the language in Ireland, how and when the students use Irish themselves, what they think should be done to change the status of the language and whether they would teach it to their own children. The questions had been prepared beforehand but the conversation was let flow freely (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2002: 78-9). The students were eager to discuss the given topics and at the end of the discussion one of them said: "You made me want to learn Irish again."

In order to get another perspective on the topic, a student from a different background was interviewed. The student studies Irish in university but is not from an Irish-speaking family. The aim was to find out if this student's thoughts on the language would oppose those of the others' and possibly learn what makes some people want to continue studying Irish in tertiary education. The plan was successful as the interviewee offered a different viewpoint and described what students of Irish think of the future of the language.

3.3 Participants

Caoimhe⁴, 21, was good at Irish at school but thinks that the reason for that was the teacher rather than the curriculum. She enjoyed learning Irish partly because of her interest in languages in general and partly because she thought that Irish people should know their national language. She went to the Gaeltacht, but found speaking Irish very difficult. Her grandparents can speak Irish, but she does not know what her parents think of the language.

Saorlaith, 23, was good at Irish in primary school. In secondary school her abilities in the subject declined and she had to seek extra help in order to pass her Leaving Certificate exam. Her parents were very encouraging although they do not speak much Irish themselves. She studied Irish mainly because she felt she had to, in the same way one must study all subjects.

Eamon's, 21, Irish worsened during secondary school. He was not motivated to learn the language because he was not satisfied with teaching. He does not know what his parents' attitudes towards Irish are, although recently his mother said that she would like to learn it again.

Fionn, 21, was not good at Irish in secondary school and disliked the subject because of the focus on ancient literature and grammar. He thinks that his parents are

⁴ The names have been changed.

probably quite indifferent about the language, although they encouraged him to study it and probably would have made him do it had it not been compulsory. He went to the Gaeltacht but did not find it very useful because he felt he could not speak Irish. Out of all the interviewees Fionn was the most positive towards the language and its future.

Niamh, 21, studies Irish in university. She is from an English-speaking family although one of her grandparents used to speak some Irish to her. She was not good at Irish at school, but she went to Gaeltacht for three summers and fell in love with the language there. The Gaeltacht experience encouraged her to speak Irish and although she was not satisfied with the curriculum, she wanted to learn Irish at school. She applied for university thinking Irish would be taught very differently there, but was disappointed as the same ancient literature-based studies continued. She does not believe she will use Irish after she graduates and out of all the interviewees she was the most negative towards the future of the language.

3.4 Methods of analysis

The interviews were transcribed and the data was divided under the three sub-questions of the research problem: how strong a part of national identity the Irish language is for Irish university students, what their attitudes towards Irish in comprehensive education are and what their thoughts are on the future of the language. The answers of the interviewees were compared with each other and with Moriarty's (2010) and O'Rourke's (2011) results, but keeping in mind that the participants in O'Rourke's research come from the Dublin area (see section 2.3).

The present study borrows methods from both data- and theory-based analysis (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2002: 97-100). The aim is to use a descriptive analysis of the interviews, clustering and abstracting the results. The results are then tied together with previous research and with the history of the language. As the sample is small,

the results cannot be generalised, but the aim is rather to describe some individuals' views on previously researched topics for a deeper understanding on the subject.

The interviewees' answers to the three sub-questions of the research problem are reported and illustrated with examples in sections 4.1-4.3. Section 4.4 focuses on the overall analysis of the data and draws together the three previous parts as it seeks to answer the question of what Irish university students' attitudes to their vernacular are.

4 IRISH THROUGH THE EYES OF THE YOUNG GENERATION

4.1 Irish in school: What is going wrong?

As Census 2011 (Census 2011 reports 2012) shows, only 41.4 per cent of Irish citizens report an ability to speak the Irish language despite it being a compulsory subject in basic education. It can, therefore, be expected that learning it at school has been somewhat unappealing. Fionn, Eamon and Saorlaith were good at Irish in primary school but in secondary school their abilities in the subject gradually worsened. According to them, their teachers and the way in which the language was taught were unsatisfactory. Caoimhe was good at Irish but believes it was because her teacher was very professional, and she agreed with the others that the language should be taught differently. Fionn felt that he had to learn too much grammar and verbs in primary school and the focus was on conversation. Niamh enjoyed her summers in the Gaeltacht, where the students talked about everyday things such as favourite TV-shows and music. She claims that it was the inspiration she got from the Gaeltacht that pushed her to study Irish at school even though she disliked it. Saorlaith found Irish extremely boring because she had to learn many things by heart without understanding them. She remembers how she got many similar essay titles in exams and therefore learned an essay in Irish by heart and depending on the title

made “a few cheeky changes” to the essay she had learned. In secondary school the students had to study a great amount of literature and only in the Leaving Certificate exam were they required to speak some Irish.

It is noteworthy that teachers should increase attitude-changing methods in class (Mantle-Bromley 1995) but if they fail to do so, an L2 identity (see Dörnyei 1998) might not develop. The interviews in the present study suggest that some students are already aware of the cultural heritage-aspect of Irish when they are at school whereas others, like Eamon in extract 1 below, only realise it later.

EXTRACT 1

Eamon: I think I would have chosen it anyway, maybe. I think now that I'm older I think I would've, but when I was in school I was like, no, it's so shite.

Extract 1 summarises the thoughts of many Irish people, according to the interviewees. Now when he is finishing his studies in tertiary education and feels that Irish has cultural value, Eamon has changed his opinion on mandatory Irish in school. Caoimhe liked languages in general at school, but she thought she should learn Irish because it is the national language of Ireland. When listening to her in the group discussion, Fionn realised that the aspect of it being the national language had never crossed his mind in school, although at the time of the interview he was the most positive out of all the interviewees when talking about the future of the language and its meaning to Ireland. The other two students had studied Irish because they had felt they had to learn it, the same way one must learn other languages in school. As the results of the present study show, Irish pupils like or dislike studying the vernacular for a variety of reasons, which is important to consider in language planning.

The keyword in the interviews was *oral communication* as the students strongly emphasised its value. Saorlaith had observed that after she went to university her old school started a new policy where every morning the pupils talk in Irish for half an hour, which was seen as a positive development in the group interview. Niamh claimed that the best way to motivate pupils would be to talk freely about things

they are interested in, such as popular culture. Furthermore, compulsion seems to be a way to get motivated, as shown in extract 2.

EXTRACT 2

Interviewer: You did a lot of literature in secondary school?

Saorlaith, Caoimhe, Fionn: Yeah.

Interviewer: So poetry and stuff?

Saorlaith: **Yeah, and we were meant to talk about it but we weren't able to speak -**

Fionn: Yeah, and **there's no oral exam in primary school at all -**

Saorlaith: Yeah.

Fionn: - and there is for your leaving cert⁵.

Eamon: **They should bring it to the junior cert⁶.**

Fionn: Yeah.

As illustrated in extract 2, the interviewees felt that oral exams are necessary in order for pupils to learn to speak Irish. As most of the interviewees had not developed a strong L2 identity during their time in compulsory education, an oral exam could have motivated them to study (Dörnyei 1998: 117-118). The students mentioned that adding an oral exam to the Junior Certificate has been a subject of discussion in Ireland. If this change is made, assessing its impact on performance in oral communication will be worthwhile.

Deficiencies in teaching can be compensated for with high motivation (Dörnyei 1998), but the interviewees had had motivation problems at school, and the learning conditions were strongly criticised. Throughout the interviews the students kept mentioning the curriculum. They agreed that Irish should be taught the same way as other languages are taught in school: there should be more conversation and less ancient Irish literature which should be a separate subject. The interviewees' answers are in line with Mantle-Bromley's (1995) conclusion on teachers' important role in language attitudes and language learning as they criticised their teachers for not making the classes interesting. However, they also argued that one cannot only blame the teachers for the poor learning results since, as Caoimhe expressed it, "they're restrained" by it and "even the best teacher can only do so much with the curriculum".

⁵ Leaving Certificate is the state exam taken after the last year of secondary school

⁶ Junior Certificate is the state exam normally taken after third year in secondary school

4.2 Future of Irish: Hopes on the next generation

The students were interviewed during their last year in university when Ireland was in the middle of an economic crisis. Many of the students' friends had already moved abroad as Ireland could not offer them work. Emigration was discussed at length and the students agreed that it plays a part in why people might not have interest to learn Irish (extract 3).

EXTRACT 3

Interviewer: How could that be achieved that - or do you have any ideas how can you improve the status -

Fionn: You're asking the wrong people!

[Laughter]

Interviewer: You are the future of Ireland -

Fionn: No we're not, we're all leaving - [laughs for a long time] - we're really not like.

Losing Irish skills to emigration is not new to Ireland, as great waves of emigration have been seen throughout the history of the nation. Keeping up skills in the language nobody speaks in the new country does not seem worthwhile. The economic crisis had affected the interviewees' attitudes towards Irish, as extracts 3 and 4 show. In extract 3 Fionn does not take the responsibility to personally maintain their vernacular and Caoimhe in extract 4 (below) explains it is "a waste of time".

EXTRACT 4

Caoimhe: - you know, people are going to go travelling, are moving to America and all these places where you'd be - like it'd actually be a waste of time to go back and learn it properly -

Extracts 3 and 4 also raise the question of national identity. Irish people are according to Fionn "particularly proud" and the majority of Irish students feel the language is a strong part of the national identity (O'Rourke 2011; Moriarty 2010). However, it can be questioned whether such an important part of Irishness would be lost if it was as important as the students claimed it was.

The students in the group interview were all sure that the next generation will speak better Irish. They believed in the future of the language. However, in the interview their belief in the language was questioned as they were asked whether the way to

improve the status of the language is to hope that the next generation will do it (extract 5):

EXTRACT 5

Interviewer: Yeah – but is it always the next generation though? What would you do in order to make Ireland more bilingual?

Eamon: Become Taoiseach⁷ –

Fionn: Leave.

[Laughter]

Fionn: We'll leave until there's nothing but Irish-speakers left 'cause that's the amount of people that would actually be employed – and em – so then we'll just have all native Irish-speakers!

Eamon: I would love to just go around speaking Irish all day every day –

Caoimhe: Would you?

Saorlaith: Comment!

Fionn: Let's start now. [Speaks Irish]

Eamon: Yeah when I hear people speaking in Irish I'm like – cool –

Extract 5 illustrates the positive attitudes towards Irish as well as the shadow of the economic crisis. In theory, knowing Irish would be nice and the next generation will speak it better. In addition, extract 5 shows that despite the positive attitudes, the interviewees did not have concrete ideas on how the language situation could be improved. Accordingly, instead of being able to think of a good answer, Eamon jokingly says he could become the Taoiseach and Fionn reminds him that nevertheless, there is no work in Ireland for them. The interviewees were asked whether they are actually planning on learning more Irish or if it is only a nice idea. “It would be nice” and “maybe when I'm older” were mentioned many times in relation to this. This will be discussed further in section 4.4.

The students were asked how they would motivate their pupils to learn Irish if they taught it themselves. The interviewees had been very talkative during the course of the interview but this question silenced them. The silence is broken in extract 6 by Fionn, who does not have an answer and instead starts joking about it:

EXTRACT 6

Interviewer: How would you motivate your students if you were an Irish teacher –

Fionn: I – I'm an English student...

⁷ Taoiseach is the Irish word for Prime Minister

[Laughter]

Interviewer: But how would you though?

Fionn: Wha?

Interviewer: Like if you had to?

Fionn: I'd take the cane out...

Similar to extract 5, the interviewees realise in extract 6 that they do not have concrete suggestions for improving the status of the Irish language, although at the beginning of the interview they spoke a great deal about their dislike in the teaching and the curriculum. The extract illustrates the way in which the interviewees dealt with difficult questions, which was to either joke or stay silent. It is clear that despite the strong dissatisfaction about the curriculum, the students had not thought of what could be done about it.

In Moriarty's (2010) research almost 90 per cent of the respondents wanted their children to speak Irish, but O'Rourke's (2011) data suggests that a much smaller number would teach Irish at home. The interviewees all claimed that they would like their children to learn Irish and they would also teach them at home if they had the ability to do that. However, none of them felt that they had this ability, although in theory they all thought it would be perfect if their children were bilingual. In extract 7 Eamon is quick to answer the question of whether the future generation should learn Irish:

EXTRACT 7

Interviewer: Would you teach your children Irish and like do you think Irish should be passed on and how would you motivate your children to learn it? Or if it wasn't compulsory in the future would you make them do it anyway?

Eamon: Yeah, I would.

Saorlaith: Yeah.

Interviewer: Why?

Eamon: Cultural heritage -

[Pause]

Eamon: I don't know how I'd motivate them though.

As in previous examples, there is a strong feeling in extract 7 that Irish should be passed on to the next generation, but Eamon cannot explain how that could be achieved. After this, the students tried to think of ways in which to teach Irish.

Caoimhe, Saorlaith and Niamh thought popular culture would be a good way to get people interested whereas Fionn strongly disagreed with them saying his teachers had tried it and failed. According to him, teachers should be more nationalistic about Irish and remind the pupils that Irish is an important part of the island's culture. It can be noted that Fionn had not thought about this aspect of Irish when he was learning it in school himself. The present study therefore suggests that it is worth revising the teaching methods so that children learn about their culture from a younger age.

4.3 Irish in Ireland: What is its role?

Eamon and Fionn had a debate on whether people these days would choose Irish as a school subject were it not compulsory. These students were both male and from middle-sized English-speaking towns, and neither of them was good at Irish after primary school. Eamon was of the opinion that Irish would be more popular in the countryside whereas Fionn argued that most people in urban areas would still be keen to learn their vernacular. The debate supported O'Rourke (2011: 134-5), who notes that due to the general lack of debate on Ireland's language situation Irish people are unaware of how others feel about it. As there is no nationwide data on language attitudes in Ireland since 1993, the question on which Eamon and Fionn debated remains unanswered.

The students all thought that Irish people should know at least some Irish. According to Niamh, Irish people should have some sort of comprehension of their vernacular. However, she argued that one cannot blame the Irish people for not knowing Irish as the curriculum and the teaching are poor. The students agreed that, as it is the national language, people should be able to speak it. Both Eamon and Fionn mentioned that in an ideal world Ireland would be bilingual, although they did not expect this to happen. In extract 8 Fionn and Caoimhe discuss this:

EXTRACT 8

Fionn: Like Irish people are so particularly proud being Irish, so I don't know if they'd have that big a problem with it - you wouldn't think we'd have that much problems speaking our own language like -

...

Caoimhe: - we can be positive and nostalgic about the language all we want but can't change the fact that our L1 is English - and - you grow up in an English-speaking environment and English is the one you need to get by - and when you're travelling or whatever you speak English -

Above Fionn asks the one of the core questions that has been mentioned frequently in the present study: why cannot Irish people speak their vernacular? According to Caoimhe in extract 8, it is impossible to return to the past and to not accept the fact that English is the L1 in Ireland. As her ancestors did over two hundred years ago, she notes the fact that English is a practical medium of communication and grants people more opportunities in life than Ireland's vernacular, spoken daily by a few per cent of the population.

The Irish student Niamh in her interview explained that she will not use Irish after she leaves university as her interest in the language has declined during the past four years. According to her, Ireland will not be bilingual in the future either, due to the curriculum and the repercussions of the past when Irish was thought to be a backward language (extract 9). She also said Irish and the IRA have a strong connection, which many people do not like.

EXTRACT 9

Niamh: Difficult one [laughs] - em - I don't think it (Irish) has a lot of - em - respect from people who live in Ireland - I don't think there's a big future for it - **considering it hasn't happened already and people talk about** - the decline of Irish and now they're - [laughs] - I could think of the word in Irish but I can't in English - the em - the lightening up of the language again - the revival, revival - **the language revival - everyone's talking about that again and - but it hasn't really happened** - kind of still in those areas - those small areas - **people are not interested anymore - it's not a part of our culture anymore** -

Niamh does not believe that the attempted language revival will ever be successful. Extract 9 concludes her lost belief in the Irish language, as she claims that it has ceased to be a part of Ireland's culture. According to her, most people have quit her course and from the people still studying it around half think now that Irish is not a

useful language and that they will probably emigrate in any case. Ó Riagáin (1997: 26) argues that Irish stays alive as a small minority still enjoys learning it. Even from this minority, according to Niamh, many lose interest in university. However, despite Niamh's negative attitudes towards the future of the language, she too hoped that her children would learn Irish. Even though she did not believe in the future of the vernacular, she did not seem ready to let it die.

4.4 Language attitudes in Ireland

The aim of the interviews was to continue where Moriarty (2010) and O'Rourke (2011) had left. Previous research shows that Irish is part of Irish university students' national identity and attitudes towards the attempted language revival are fairly positive. The present study focused on the students' attitudes towards Irish in schools, what is going wrong and what should be done, whether the future of the language feels brighter and whether the Irish language is truly a part of the students' national identity. Saorlaith in extract 10 concludes the interviewees' thoughts in the present study:

EXTRACT 10

Saorlaith: I think when we get to this age we realise how bad we are at it and we kind of wish we could have – so that's why we are so positive about it – 'cause younger generations we kinda hope – it would change –

Although positive about their vernacular, the interviewees could not provide answers to what they would do in order to improve the status of the language. The data shows a clear mismatch between positive attitudes and lack of motivation. These two main themes arise from the discussion of all the three sub-questions of the research question "What are Irish university students' attitudes towards their vernacular?" Table 1 below illustrates the two main themes that occur in the discussion related to all the three sub-questions of the present study. "Positive attitudes" refers to all the comments about Irish being a part of Irish school, future and identity. "Hesitation" refers to lack of motivation, few ideas for improving the

teaching and the status of Irish and the students distancing themselves from the responsibility to do something in order to make a change.

TABLE 1 Positive attitudes and lack of motivation. An illustration of the findings.

	POSITIVE ATTITUDES	HESITATION
SCHOOL	<p>The students would have chosen Irish had it not been compulsory</p> <p>Some want to learn it because it is the national language</p>	<p>Irish is taught wrong</p> <p>Irish should be taught like other languages</p> <p>Poor teachers</p> <p>Poor curriculum</p> <p>Too much literature</p> <p>No focus on conversation</p> <p>There should be a great deal of oral communication and talking about everyday things in class</p> <p>Teacher's responsibility (although little can be done if the curriculum is not good)</p> <p>Many opinions about using popular culture in classroom</p> <p>More nationalistic talk in classroom</p>
FUTURE	<p>The students would teach their children some Irish if they could</p> <p>They would make their children study Irish at school</p>	<p>Some people are motivated as Irish is their national language, but some children do not think about it when they are young</p> <p>The students do not know how they would motivate the future generation</p> <p>The effect of emigration</p> <p>Hopes on the next generation</p>
IDENTITY	<p>In an ideal world Ireland would be bilingual</p> <p>Irish people should be able to speak some Irish</p>	<p>Irish people cannot be blamed for not knowing the vernacular</p> <p>Emigration: knowing Irish abroad would be nice but not very useful</p>

Throughout the interview it was clear that Irish students appreciate their cultural heritage and the history of their language, that having their own language separates them from other countries and that Irish is an important feature in the Irish culture. However, the students claimed that due to the way it was taught, their motivation and interest to learn the vernacular had declined radically. They agreed that if they learned it now, they would be keener to study it. This suggests that national identity only develops when students are older, but at that stage they might have studied Irish for a long time with no motivation and poor learning results. Accordingly, the Irish people, generation after generation, are in a situation where they want their children to be more interested at a younger age than what they themselves were. It is, however, difficult to motivate someone to learn Irish if the curriculum is not satisfactory, and options to use Irish outside school – or the country – are limited. Unpleasant learning memories do not encourage learning the language even when one is older, if studying Irish is continuously associated with ancient literature and difficult grammar.

5 CONCLUSION

The Irish university students interviewed are positive about their vernacular, arguing that it is an important part of their cultural heritage and national identity. They feel that all Irish people should have some comprehension of the language and would like their children to learn it, too. Most of them also believe that although now a language of only a small minority, Irish will stay alive in the future. Nevertheless, the students lacked motivation to learn Irish at school and although they would like to teach it to their children, they do not feel that they have the ability to do that. The interviews conducted for the present study challenged the students to think whether they will attempt to improve the status of the Irish language personally in their own

lives and whether it is as important a part of their national identity as they first claimed it was. The results show that although in an ideal world Irish would be widely used in Ireland, the students cannot see it happening. They believe that the next generation will have a better comprehension of the vernacular. However, as the students strongly criticise the curriculum, it seems that the next generation will not have more motivation to learn it unless the teaching is in some way changed. Furthermore, the students do not have many suggestions for how to improve the curriculum, despite their criticism of the current one.

The sample in the present study is small, which means that the results cannot be generalised. In order to get a wider perspective on Ireland's language issues, students of different fields of study and from different universities could have been interviewed. The interviewees were told in advance what the topic of the interview would be. It is possible that they would have had more thoughts on the questions if also the questions had been given to them some time before the interview. However, all of the interviewees had a great deal to say even though they had not been informed of with the questions beforehand. The loosely structured interview worked as planned since the students discussed the given topics eagerly and asked each other defining questions. The interview challenged the students to think of topics they had not discussed before, which was an unforeseen effect. Therefore, the discussion might have raised more thoughts afterwards and it would have been interesting to ask the students to write a reflection on the discussion and whether they had learned something from it. However, the interviews in the present study worked for their purposes as planned. The history of the Irish language and the previous research had been reviewed before the interviews. The interviews were based on the gained knowledge and their structure was still satisfactory when the results were analysed.

The present study suggests that if Ireland wishes to maintain the vernacular outside the Gaeltacht in the future, there is a need for revising teaching methods, and broader research on language attitudes in Ireland could help in language planning. The results show that there might be an interest to learn Irish if the curriculum were

changed. Further research could focus on motivation problems or successful learning methods in Irish classrooms. If an oral exam is added to the Junior Certificate, its impact on learning results will be an important research topic that could help future language planning in Ireland. The present study focused on how some students feel about their vernacular, but suggests that for more reliable results on language attitudes, pupils' learning results and eagerness to communicate in Irish should be studied in Irish basic education. For instance, a widespread study on the impact of different learning techniques and materials could be conducted through tests and learning logs as well as questionnaires and interviews.

The present study aimed to be a starting point for research that could evaluate the situation of the Irish language today. Its results suggest that the focus on future language planning in Ireland should start in schools, as it is the schools that seem to cause motivation problems. The present study argues that if nothing is changed, Irish will continue to be a minority language that has no real value as a means of communication in the English-speaking Ireland. The Irish language has been important to the Irish people since it has clearly distinguished them from their old ruler Great Britain. Fasold (2006: 377) describes *nationalism* as a term related to a people and their understanding of themselves as a separate group, and therefore a national language could be described as a national flag with its value "more symbolic than functional". An official language is compared by Fasold (ibid.) to the national railroad, meaning that its status is purely functional. Irish is the national and the first official language of Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann 1937) and is therefore, using Fasold's examples, not only the flag but also the railroad. As the country is known for its sometimes dysfunctional railway network, the present study argues that Fasold's description is very appropriate.

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