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## Open Access

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**‘New speakers’ of Irish in the United States: practices and motivations**

**Abstract:** This paper examines the experiences and motivations of ‘new speakers’ of Irish in the United States. ‘New speakers’ of Irish refer to those whose first language is not Irish but who use the language regularly and fluently. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out among Irish speakers in five locations across the United States, the paper begins by describing the language backgrounds of participants. It goes on to analyse their use of Irish and their motivations for learning it and considers the links between practice and ideology. Although Irish heritage and culture are often strong motivating factors for Americans to learn Irish, not all learners are Irish American and only some advance to a level of competence high enough to adopt Irish as family or home language and/or attempt to influence the language ideologies of others. High and active competence is linked to deep personal dedication and is achieved despite significant obstacles facing those who wish to become new speakers of Irish in the United States. This research is part of a broader European project about the practices and ideologies of ‘new speakers’ from a range of languages.

**Keywords:** new speakers, Irish language, United States, language ideologies, language practices

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## 1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe and analyse the language practices and motivations of ‘new speakers’ of Irish in the United States. ‘New speakers’ are understood as regular and fluent users of Irish who did not acquire it as a language of initial socialisation in the Gaeltacht, the traditional heartland of the language where Irish is still spoken, to varying extents, as a community

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language (Ní Bhrádaigh et al. 2007). Due to the key position of Irish as a core curriculum subject in primary and post-primary education in the Republic of Ireland, the majority of new speakers begin to acquire it at school. However, there are increasing numbers of new speakers outside Ireland due to the proliferation of opportunities to study Irish abroad.

Based on an ethnographic methodology involving participant observation and semi-structured interviews, this paper focusses on the narrative histories of a sample of US-born Irish speakers. They did not attend the Irish educational system and therefore learned Irish through other formal means, often as adults and predominantly in the United States. The research is part of a broader project examining practices and ideologies of new speakers of Irish in Ireland itself and of new speakers of minority languages in a variety of European settings (O'Rourke et al. 2015; O'Rourke and Walsh 2015). While new speakers may be perceived as playing an important role in the development of minority languages, their claims to 'speakerness' can be challenged by discourses which tend to idealise native speech. Due to such discourses, the experiences, trajectories and ideologies of new speakers of Irish have not been studied as closely as those of traditional speakers (O'Rourke and Walsh 2015). Coupled with this marginalisation has been a tendency to overlook the existence and lived experiences of new speakers of Irish outside Ireland. By shedding light on such international new speakers, this paper attempts to bridge that gap.

## 2 Background and context

Millions of Irish immigrants, many of them Irish speakers, have settled in the United States since the nineteenth century. A particularly large influx of Irish speakers was recorded following the Great Famine of the 1840s which disproportionately affected the Irish-speaking poor. However, many Irish-speaking immigrants 'concentrated their efforts on mastering English, the language of their new land' (McGowan 1994: 4) and suppressed the language with which they were most familiar. Although traditional Irish speakers persisted for longer in certain urban areas where there were high concentrations of immigrants (for instance Boston), the majority of Irish-speaking incomers shifted to English within a generation or two (see also Kallen 1994; Ní Bhroiméil 2001).

Recent census data illustrates that 22,279 people speak Irish at home in the United States, making Irish the 76th most common home language (of a total of 327). Of these, 3,455 people or 15.5% spoke English 'less than well'. The highest concentrations of speakers are in Massachusetts, New York, Illinois and California (United States Census Bureau 2010). There is no information as to

whether speakers were born in Ireland or in the United States. However, the states with the highest concentrations of Irish speakers have traditionally been favoured destinations for Irish emigrants, which suggests that some immigrants continue to maintain Irish after they arrive in the United States.

The teaching of Irish at universities has received a significant boost in recent years due to the work of the Fulbright Commission in Ireland which provides grants for Irish citizens to study or teach Irish in the United States, and for US citizens to do the same in Ireland. In 2011, the Commission reported that Irish was taught at 51 higher education institutes and 36 non-academic institutions (such as Irish Centres or branches of *Conradh na Gaeilge*<sup>1</sup>) in the United States (Ireland-United States [Fulbright] Commission 2011: 5). In 2009, the Modern Languages Association reported that 406 third-level students were studying 'Irish' or 'Modern Irish', placing Irish in 27th place among the 277 less widely taught languages surveyed, higher than Modern Greek or Czech (Furman et al 2010: 31).<sup>2</sup>

### 3 Methodology and sample

Before embarking on fieldwork, Irish language organisations in both the eastern and western United States were contacted and their assistance sought with identifying fluent speakers who would be interested in participating in the research. Using a snowballing approach, a list of approximately 20 individuals was compiled. The criteria for selection were functional fluency in Irish (based on the speaker's self-assessment), not having acquired Irish as a home language and not having received formal education in Ireland. Therefore traditional speakers of Irish who had emigrated from the Gaeltacht or other Irish-born fluent speakers who had learned Irish at school or elsewhere were excluded from the sample.

Fieldwork was conducted over a 2-week period in five locations in 2013 on both the east and west coasts of the United States. In keeping with previous methodology of the new speakers project, fieldwork was based on participant observation and semi-structured individual biographical interviews. Not all individuals identified initially were available when fieldwork began but it was possible to conduct 13 in-depth interviews with eight men and five women.

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes known in English as the Gaelic League, *Conradh na Gaeilge* is Ireland's largest and oldest voluntary Irish language organisation and has a number of branches in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge the assistance of Gearóid Ó Duinn (Villanova University and University of Limerick) with this section.

Participants ranged in age from 37 to 71 with the majority over 50. Almost all identified as Irish-American. The interview protocol was designed to elucidate information about the speaker's language background, their practice of Irish and their ideologies around the language and the Gaeltacht. Some interviews were supplemented by additional reflections or clarifications provided by the participants themselves at a later stage. Although all participants had identified as 'fluent', or been presented as such when the fieldwork was being prepared, the interviews revealed a spectrum of competence ranging from intermediate to advanced. Some of the less advanced speakers switched to English for sections of the interviews, or code-mixed regularly due to lexical gaps. Others were confident speakers of more idiomatic Irish and one participant was a highly competent speaker of a variety close to a traditional Gaeltacht dialect. Three of the 13 participants reported speaking Irish to their children and/or to partners.

In addition to interviews, participant observation was conducted in informal (conversation circle for intermediate learners) and formal (immersion weekend for fluent learners) educational settings. Approximately 50 people were present at these events, including some of the interviewees. Notes and photographs were taken in these settings and documents and other printed materials related to the Irish language and the participants were gathered.

The interview data was transcribed according to the protocol attached to this article. Errors in the original Irish or codeswitching to English were not amended and remain in the extracts which follow. Coding of transcripts identified several themes and sub-themes related to the linguistic background of speakers, their practice of Irish and their ideologies towards it.

## 4 Data analysis

The first section of the data analysis will concentrate on the language background of participants, the ways in which they acquired Irish and their current language practices. The second section will discuss their motivations for learning Irish and provide a general overview of their ideological disposition towards the language. A more comprehensive analysis of the ideological positioning of this group is beyond the scope of this short paper.

### 4.1 Language background

As required by the selection criteria, none of the participants had been raised with Irish as a home language, and all reported English as their first language.

Two participants reported being very interested in languages from a young age and having learned a number of languages other than Irish during their school years. Three interviewees had some exposure to Irish in their youth. Participant A1,<sup>3</sup> a 65-year-old man, remembered hearing his grandparents speaking Irish to each other in their home. They were native speakers who had emigrated to the United States from the Donegal Gaeltacht:

A1: Bhí mo sheanathair agus mo sheanmháthair eh ag labhairt Gaedhlig le chéile [...] ach ní raibh suim ar bith ag m'athair eh sa Ghaedhlig. Ach nuair a bhí mé óg d'éirigh mo mháthair an-tinn agus cuireadh [...] mé a bheith i mo chónaí le mo sheanathair agus mo sheanmháthair agus bhí mé ag éisteacht leofa eh ag caint as Gaedhlig le chéile.

A1: My grandfather and grandmother were taking Irish together [...] but my father had no interest in Irish. But when I was young my mother became very ill and I was sent [...] to live with my grandfather and grandmother and I was listening to them eh speaking Irish together.

The parents of participant B1, a 71-year-old woman, emigrated from Ireland to the east coast. Although they spoke only English, she recalled that their English was heavily marked by Irish and that her great-great-grandparents had been native speakers:

B1: Béarlóirí a bhí iontu ach ar ndóigh bhí rian na Gaeilge go láidir ann ina chuid Béarla so chuala mé corrfhocal as Gaeilge *like* agus nathanna rudaí mar sin *you know* ón bheirt acu so bhí a fhios agam i gcónaí go raibh teanga ann.

B1: They were English speakers but of course there was a strong trace of Irish in their English so I would hear the odd word in Irish like and sayings things like that you know from both of them so I knew always that there was a language there.

The parents of participant B2, a 53-year-old man, also emigrated from Ireland. His mother had attended Irish-medium education and was competent in Irish in her youth, and his great-grandmother was a native speaker.

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<sup>3</sup> All participants are identified by a combination of letter and number. The letter represents a location and the number represents the order of the interview in that location. In other words, A3 refers to the third interview conducted in location A.

B2: Bhí mé tógtha go hiomlán le Béarla amháin ach bhí mo mháthair ag canadh amhráin ó am go ham sa Gaeilge ach bhí cara cléibh m'athair bhí neart Gaeilge aige as an scoil lán-Gaeilge freisin.

B2: I was raised entirely with English but my mother would sing songs in Irish from time to time but my father's best friend had a lot of Irish from the all-Irish school also.

All three participants referred to Irish-speaking grandparents or great-grandparents who emigrated from Ireland in the nineteenth century, or whose children left Ireland subsequently. Almost all the other participants mentioned more distant Irish ancestors who were even more likely to be Irish speaking. Emigration disproportionately affected Irish speakers as they comprised the poorest cohorts of society who left Ireland to seek a better life in the United States, particularly in the large cities of the northeast (McGowan 1994). Rapid language shift was common, leaving future generations monolingual in English, but their linguistic heritage was an important point of reference for the descendants of those immigrants who participated in this study (see Section 5). Participant B2 was also influenced by the revivalist policy of the Irish state as his mother and a family friend had both attended Irish-medium education. In conclusion, both native speaker heritage and language-in-education policy in Ireland influenced the linguistic background of a minority of the sample and most participants were aware of the likelihood of Irish-speaking ancestors.

## 4.2 Acquisition of Irish

All of the participants began by studying Irish in the United States, occasionally through self-tuition but usually by taking a course at their university or in their local Irish Centre. Interviewees based on the east coast took advantage of the better provision of Irish courses there and all had attended residential immersion weekends. Participant B1, who began learning Irish in her 40s, described the importance of the weekend courses:

B1: Aon uair a bhí mé ag cailliúint mo mhisneach bheadh deireadh seachtaine nua ag teacht chugainn agus ansin *you know* tar éis an spraoi agus na ranganna bhíodh an misneach ar ais ionam.

B1: Anytime I was losing my confidence a new weekend would be coming up and then you know after the fun and the classes my confidence would be back.

Participant C1, a woman in her 50s, began with self-tuition, took up Irish classes in her area and 'broke through' when she took a Gaeltacht course in Ireland:

C1: Nuair a chuaigh mé ar ais go hÉirinn bhí mé ábalta cúpla *just* cúpla focal a úsáid agus chuaigh muid go [áit A] agus bhí mé ábalta mo chuid Guinness a ordú as Gaeilge so bhí mé iontach bródúil LF [...] Ach an uair sin chuaigh mé go [Gaeltacht] agus chaith mé chaith mé seachtain ann agus *just* [...] bris mé thríd agus mé in [ainm an chúrsa] agus ina dhiaidh sin bhí mé ábalta caint.

C1: When I went back to Ireland I was able to use just a few words and we went to [place A] and I was able to order my Guinness in Irish so I was very proud LF [...] But that time I went to [Gaeltacht] and I spent a week there and I just [...] broke through while I was in [name of course] and after that I was able to speak.

Participant B2 also attended Gaeltacht courses in Ireland but stressed that he had learned most of his Irish in the United States:

B2: Bíonn daoine ag cur ceist chugam anois ar an *Irish Arts Center* mar shampla nó rud mar sin agus *you know* [...] 'conas ar fhoghlaim tú do chuid Gaeilge?' agus caithfidh mé smaoineamh ar sin agus d'fhoghlaim mé an mhórchuid sa tír seo as na cainteoirí eile agus nuair a bhfuil deis agamsa dul go dtí na deireadh seachtainí deis agatsa a bheith ag cleachtadh do chuid Gaeilge an am go hiomlán ar feadh dhá lá so is rud maith é i ndáiríre mar deis. Agus d'fhreastail mé cúrsa sa Gaeltacht uair amháin i [áit A] ar feadh faoi dhó i [áit A] ar feadh coicís dhá uair agus ar feadh míosa i [áit B] seacht agus dhá bhliain ó shin//ach i ndáiríre fuair mé an mhórchuid mo chuid Gaeilge sa tír seo.

B2: People ask me now at the Irish Arts Center for instance or something like that and you know [...] 'how did you learn your Irish?' And I have to think about that and I learned most of it in this country from the other speakers and when I have a chance to go to the weekends a chance for you to practice your Irish for the whole time for two days so it's a good thing really as an opportunity//and I attended a course in the Gaeltacht once in [place A] for twice in [place A] both times and for a month in [place B] seven and two years ago//but really I learned most of my Irish in this country.



Participant D2, a 48-year-old who is raising his son with Irish, also combined classes on the west coast, self-study and a trip to the Gaeltacht:

D2: Thart fá an tríú bliain bhí mé ag déanamh staidéar b'fhéidir trí uair an chloig [sa lá] agus bhí a fhios agam go raibh mé ag dul chun na hÉireann so thug sé sin spreagadh eile dom go raibh mé ag dul ann/agus nuair a bhí mé ag dul ann *you know* bhí mé ag smaoineamh b'fhéidir nach mbeidh mé ag filleadh ar ais go ceann fada agus mar sin thóg mé trí seachtaine mar laethanta saoire go léir agus freisin thóg mé dhá seachtain eile gan pá.

D2: About the third year I was studying perhaps three hours [each day] and I knew that I was going to Ireland so that encouraged me that I was going there/and when I was going there you know I was thinking that perhaps I wouldn't be returning for a long time and so I took three weeks holidays all together and I also took two weeks without pay.

Participant A2, a 60-year-old man, began learning Irish in his 20s at courses in Irish Centres in the city where he lived. However, he was advised by a visiting Irish language enthusiast that he should go to Ireland and live with Irish speakers in a city for extended periods:

A2: Thairg sé domhsa go dtiocfadh liom dul agus stopadh aige i [ainm an bhaile] agus go an t-aos óg a bhí Gaedhlig acu a bhí ag teacht isteach i rith an lae nuair a bhí seisean bheadh seisean ar shiúl chun a chuid oibre agus ansin achan oíche bheimis ag dul go dtí club Gaelach [...] chuaigh mé anonn i mí Iúil nó mí na Súl Buí mar a d'fhoghlaim mé aige agus//d'fhan mé ceithre mhí ann go dtí mí Dheireadh an Fhómhair [...] gasúirí óga ag teacht isteach an toigh is ag caitheamh toitíní agus mise a déanamh roinnt tae agus arán rósta daofa agus ceapairí agus iadsan ag caint Gaedhlighe agus mise ag freastal orthu is glanadh suas ina ndiaidh agus dul ar aghaidh mar seo [...] bhí sé cruá ach chuir mé fá mo choinne Gaedhlig a fhoghlaim agus tháinig mé ina bhaile i ndiaidh ceithre mhí agus caint Gaedhlig bhí caint na Gaedhlighe agam ar dóigh.

A2: He offered that I could stay with him in [town] and that the young guys who had Irish would come in during the day when he was he would be away to his work and then every night we would go to an Irish language club [...] I went over in July or 'mí na Súl Buí' as I learned from him and//I stayed there for four months until October [...] young guys coming into the house and smoking cigarettes and me taking tea and tost for them and sandwiches and they talking Irish and me looking after them and cleaning

up after them and going along like this [...] it was tough but I knuckled down to learn Irish and I came home after four months talking Irish I was able to talk Irish really well.

A2 returned to Ireland on several occasions and spent an extended period of nine months in the Gaeltacht. His variety of Irish contained very many traditional features from that area and he was the most competent of all the interviewees. He spoke Irish to his children and teaches Irish in the area where he lives.

This data illustrates that Irish is acquired by a combination of self-study, immersion courses in the United States and trips to the Gaeltacht, although the latter is neither equally accessible to all speakers nor deemed by them to be essential. Practical constraints such as short holiday time or the cost of travel to Ireland limit the opportunities to spend extended periods in Ireland and it is significant that the majority of the participants had not spent longer than a few weeks in the Gaeltacht during their lifetime. Participants made the best of whatever resources were available to them and often displayed impressive diligence and commitment to achieving functional fluency or beyond, linked sometimes with powerful ideological motivations to learn Irish (see Section 5). Unsurprisingly, the sole participant who had spent an extended period living in the Gaeltacht had acquired a native-like idiom and was the most competent speaker of all. However, all participants were capable of maintaining a conversation entirely or mostly in Irish and they had overcome substantial obstacles of geography or cost to become speakers due to a desire to achieve fluency.

### 4.3 Language practice

There was wide variation in current language practices among participants, reflecting their own competence but also their sociolinguistic circumstances as scattered speakers of Irish in English-dominant environments in the United States. Participant E1 is a fluent speaker but has access only to dispersed Irish language networks in a large city. He explained how he uses self-tuition materials on an ongoing basis:

E1: Tá níos mó cleachtadh de dhíth orm mar [...] ní féidir liom Gaeilge a labhairt gach lá agus mar sin caithfidh mé cleachtadh leis na leabhair agus [...] leis an leabhar sin *Colloquial Irish* sin an bhlas a bhí mé ag iarraidh a úsáid.

E1: I need more practice because [...] I can't speak Irish every day and therefore I have to practice with the books and [...] with that book *Colloquial Irish* that was the accent I was trying to use.

D2, one of the more competent speakers in the sample, describes how his practice of Irish was fairly limited until the birth of his son a few years previously. He decided to raise the child with Irish as his first language, thereby creating a daily opportunity to speak the language:

D2: So nuair ar an lá gur rugadh mo mhac bhí mé ag smaoineamh seo deis iontach agam chun mo Gaeilge a chleachtadh agus Gaeilge a thabhairt do mo mhac féin.

D2: So when on the day that my son was born I was thinking this is a wonderful opportunity to practice my Irish and to give Irish to my son.

A2, a highly competent speaker, also adopted Irish as one of the languages of his home, alongside English. When his children were born, more than 20 years previously, he decided to speak Irish to them and to his wife:

A2: Tá Gaedhlig ag mo bhean. Bhí sise ag freastal ar ranganna Gaedhlighe chomh maith tá a fhios agat tríocha bliain ó shin nó mar sin [...] Agus ní labhraíonn sí Gaedhlig liom ach anois is arís nuair is mian léi agus ní bhíonn léi Gaedhlig á labhairt aici chomh minic sin ach tuigean sí mé. Ach níor labhair mé [...] ach Gaedhlig amháin le mo pháistí.

A2: My wife has Irish. She was also attending Irish classes you know thirty years ago or thereabouts [...] And she only speaks Irish to me from time to time when she wants and she doesn't speak Irish that often but she understands me. But I spoke [...] Irish only with my children.

Participant B4, a 59-year-old fluent speaker, is actively involved in Irish language events and in the promotion of Irish. As well as participating in an Irish-speaking circle of friends, Irish is his home language:

B4: Bhuel tá Gaeilge ag mo *phartner* agus is mo chuid cairde sa mbaile is Gaeilgeoirí cuid is mó againne so bím ag labhairt i nGaeilge an t-am ar fad agus m'inionsa dhá bhliain is fiche d'aois ó rugadh sí ar an saol ní bhím ag labhairt leis ach amháin i nGaeilge.

B4: Well my partner speaks Irish and my friends at home most of us are Irish speakers so I speak Irish all the time and my 22-year old daughter since she was born I have only spoken Irish with her.

Participant C1 is a 60-year-old woman who has organised Irish language courses in her area and teaches the language to other learners. She speaks Irish fluently

and uses many traditional Gaeltacht features. In this extract, C1 describes her ongoing efforts to create and sustain her own Irish-speaking network in order to use Irish as much as possible:

C1: Bhuel bainim úsáid aisti beagnach gach lá ach níl mé ag caint gach lá ach ag scríobh beagnach gach lá [...] Téann muid le chéile tá ciorcal comhrá againn agus má má tá na cairde de mo chuid a bhfuil Gaeilge acu [...] má bhfuil muid ag caint ar an guthán nó rud éigin baineann muid úsáid as Gaeilge [...] agus anois agus Raidió na Gaeltachta le fáil ar feadh blianta agus TG4 amannaí bím ag éisteacht le Raidió na Gaeltachta tá *app* agam ar mo *iPad* agus LF bím ag tá sé iontach furasta i bhfad níos furasta níos fusa anois ná a bhí sé [...] bhí muid ag iarraidh *just* ár cineál ár Ghaeltacht fhéin a chruthú. Sin an rud a deir a deirimse fhéin i gcónaí 'Caithfidh tú do Ghaeltacht fhéin a chruthú más maith leat Gaeilge a fhoghlaim'.

C1: Well I use it almost every day but I don't speak every day but [I] write almost every day. We come together we have a conversation circle and if there are friends of mine who have Irish [...] if we talk on the phone or something we use Irish [...] and now with Raidió na Gaeltachta<sup>4</sup> available for years and TG4<sup>5</sup> sometimes I listen to Raidió na Gaeltachta I have an app on my iPad I it is very easy much easier now than it was [...] we were just kind of trying to create our own Gaeltacht. That's what I always say 'you have to create your own Gaeltacht if you want to learn Irish'.

At the other end of the spectrum, participant C2, a less-fluent 63-year-old woman, explained how she keeps regular Skype appointments with other similar learners in the United States:

C2: Bhuel bíonn muid bíonn muid ag léamh píosa agus ag aistriú agus ag caint faoi frásaí amháin mar shampla agus cuir cleachtaí an frásaí seo a úsáid i slí eile.

C2: Well we read a piece and we translate and talk about certain phrases for instance and practice using those phrases in another way.

Therefore practice of Irish varies from the occasional to the frequent, based on the person's circumstances and motivations. There would appear to be a

4 Raidió na Gaeltachta is the Irish language radio station established in 1972.

5 TG4 refers to the Irish language television station established in 1996.

distinction between those whose use of Irish is limited to occasional social contacts and see it more as a hobby and those who wish to make it a common language in their homes or social networks, as much as is possible given the sociolinguistic context.<sup>6</sup> Some participants had very limited opportunities to use Irish beyond a circle of one or two friends or Irish language events such as conversation circles or immersion courses. Various methods to practice Irish were reported, ranging from printed self-tuition materials and literature to online resources and social media. Others regularly sought out the company of Irish-speaking networks or friends, sometimes native speakers from Ireland, in order to use their Irish as much as possible. A smaller number of more committed and highly competent speakers used Irish as a home language (or in parallel with English) and were raising children with Irish or bilingually. Some of the more competent speakers were themselves teaching Irish to other learners.

## 5 Motivations for learning Irish

Language practice is intimately linked with ideological and motivational factors (Spolsky 2004, Spolsky 2009), some of which have been touched on already. Although beyond the scope of this paper to examine the language ideologies of this group in detail, the next section examines their motivations for learning Irish.

### 5.1 Irish-American heritage

With the exception of two people, all participants identified as Irish-American.<sup>7</sup> Some participants' parents had been born in Ireland and emigrated to the United States. Others had Irish-born grandparents or more distant Irish ancestry. Irish heritage was singled out as a powerful motivational factor for learning Irish. A1,

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<sup>6</sup> A 1991 survey illustrated that 67% of learners could find opportunities to speak or use Irish outside the classroom and 53% reported that they 'might one day have to make themselves understood and understand others through the medium of Irish only' (Ihde 1994: 84). This suggests a similar division between casual and more committed learners, the latter category more likely to become speakers of the language.

<sup>7</sup> The 1991 survey revealed that 18% of learners of Irish in the United States did not identify as Irish-American (Ihde 1994: 84).

a semi-fluent speaker, described how learning and speaking Irish reminds him of his grandparents, native speakers from Ireland:

A1: Eh *well*//bhí mé an-cóngarach le mo sheanathair is mo sheanmháthair//iontach cóngarach *so//so* sin an fáth. Sin an fáth dáiríre [...] sílim gur chuir siad suim mór ionam fá dtaobh de rudaí Gaedhlighe rudaí Ceilteacha agus/Dún na nGall go háirithe *so* sin é.

A1: Eh *well*//I was very close to my grandfather and my grandmother//very close *so//so* that's the reason. That's the reason really [...] I think that they made me very interested in things related to Irish Celtic things and/ especially Donegal *so* that's it.

In a conversation subsequent to the interview, A1 reported that his grandparents were surprised at his interest in Irish and tried to teach him individual words. However, when his grandfather attempted entire conversations with him, his grandmother interjected with: 'why are you bothering with that pagan language?' He believed that this revealed their contradictory views: although they wanted to teach a little Irish to their grandson, it was not important enough to ensure that he would acquire a conversational ability in it (field notes).

B4 drew explicitly on his Irish-American heritage as a reason for learning and using Irish, arguing that knowledge and use of the language should be a central part of Irish-American identity:

B4: Mise cosúil le gach duine de bhunadh Éireannach anseo i Meiriceá ón gliabhán bhí a fhios agam gur bhunadh Éireannach mé ba cheart dom a bheith bródúil as agus feicim agus creidim go bhfuil an teanga i lár an chultúir agus dá bhrí sin caithfidh mé a bheith ag foghlaim na Gaeilge chun a bheith páirteach i rud atá thar a bheith tábhachtach i mo shaol i mo shaol féin. *You know* sin mise Gael-Mheiriceánach agus má tá mé ag iarraidh a bheith i mo Ghael-Mheiriceánach ceart ba cheart go mbeadh an teanga agam.

B4: I am like everyone of Irish background here in America from the cradle I knew that I was of Irish background I should be proud of it and I see and I believe that the language is at the heart of the culture and therefore I have to learn Irish to be part of something which is extremely important in my life, in my own life. You know that's me an Irish-American and if I want to be a proper Irish-American I should have the language.

However E1, a fluent speaker whose grandparents had emigrated from Ireland, was critical of the failure of many Irish-Americans to engage with Irish in a meaningful way:

E1: Ar ndóigh bhí mé ag caitheamh éadaí uaine ar Lá Fhéile Pádraig ach sílim fhéin go bhfuil níos mó ag baint le [...] le do dhúchas do *heritage*. Más Gael-Mheiriceánach thú sílim fhéin go gcaithfidh tú níos mó a dhéanamh agus is fíor go ndearna mo mhuintir fhéin mo theaghlach fhéin dearmad ar a gcultúr agus cuireann sé sin isteach orm. Tuigim nach gcaithfidh tú mura bhfuil tú tógtha le cultúr na hÉireann sin togha ach más maith leat ceangal a bheith agat le cultúr na hÉireann [...] is féidir leat é sin a dhéanamh. Is rud aisteach é i ndáiríre sílim.

E1: Of course I was wearing green clothes on St. Patrick's Day but I think that your heritage means more than that. If you are Irish-American I believe that you have to do more and it is true that my own family forgot their culture and that bothers me. I understand that you don't have to if you're not taken with Irish culture that's fine but if you want to have a connection with Irish culture [...] you can do that. Really I find it strange.

Of the estimated 38 million Americans claiming an Irish-American heritage (Ó Broin 2011), only a tiny proportion can speak Irish. Although not all descendants of immigrants maintain their heritage languages, language shift among Irish speakers in the United States may have been more extreme. Contemporary Irish America is no doubt aware that the majority of the Irish population does not know Irish and that there is no communicative need to maintain or learn Irish if travelling to the home country. In this sense, the small cohort of Irish-American new speakers represents a minority view that active use of Irish is an important part of their identity (Ihde 1994: 78–80).

## 5.2 'Gaelic' identity

When asked about their identities, three participants identified as 'Gaels' [Gaeil], a term which connotes a sense of belonging to or affinity with the ideal of an Irish-speaking Ireland, as opposed to the current sociolinguistic context where English is overwhelmingly dominant. This may be referred to as a Gaelic (as opposed to an Irish) identity.<sup>8</sup> Two examples are provided below. When asked why he spoke English to his children, A2 replied:

<sup>8</sup> The 1991 survey revealed that only 2% of learners and teachers considered Irish to be their 'native' language, with the remainder describing it as a 'foreign' language (Ihde 1994: 78–79).

A2: Le go mbeadh... le go mbeadh tuigbheáil acu gur Gaeil iad.

I: Cad is brí le Gael mar sin?

A2: Céard is brí le Gael. Grá don tír grá don don a gcuid sinsir don iarracht don teanga do ceol is damhsóir Gaelach an bheirt acu.

A2: So that ... so that they would understand that they are Gaels.

I: What does 'Gael' mean so?

A2: What does 'Gael' mean? Love for the country love for their ancestors for the effort for the language for music they are both Irish dancers.

This was B1's response when asked if Irish was her language:

B1: Ceapaim é. Mar is Gael mé. Agus *yeah* tá rud nádúrtha ann *just* is aoibhinn liom é [...]

I: Agus cad a chiallaíonn sí duit? Cad a thugann sí duit?

B1: Em. *Well just* b'fhéidir ceangal do mo mhuintir féin nó *continuum* b'fhéidir *you know*. Níl ach níl *sentimentality* amháin atá ann *but just* ba chóir go mbeadh an teanga againn agus na cúpla focal agus tugann sé misneach dom.

B1: I think so. Because I am a Gael. And *yeah* there is something natural there I just love it [...]

I: And what does it mean to you? What does it give you?

B1: Em. *Well just* perhaps a link with my own people or a continuum perhaps you know. It's it's not just *sentimentality* but just we should have the language and the few words and it gives me courage.

Although the sample is small, use of 'Gael' as an identity marker is significant because it is no longer common among Irish speakers in Ireland. Irish has two words to describe an Irish person or thing: 'Éireannach' (a noun referring to an Irish person or an adjective qualifying something related to Ireland) and 'Gael' (literally 'Gaelic person'; the adjective 'Gaelach' signifying something related to the Irish language). 'Gael' and 'Gaelach' were the common historical terms to describe Irish speakers (in opposition to English speakers). Following the foundation of the Irish state in 1922, Irishness became more closely associated with speaking English and the Irish language retreated to just one of a variety of



symbolic manifestations of Irish identity. Possibly because only one adjective – ‘Irish’ – is used in English to refer to both the language and the nationality, and given that most Irish speakers do not claim a separate identity to Irish people in general, ‘Éireannach’ now predominates over ‘Gaelach’ among Irish speakers. As they are not Irish residents and may not have a claim to Irish citizenship, it may be easier for Irish-American new speakers of Irish to claim ‘Gaelach’ rather than ‘Éireannach’ as their primary identity.

### 5.3 Cultural heritage

Aspects of traditional Irish cultural heritage, in particular traditional music, were identified by several participants as triggers for the learning of Irish. Participant A3, a woman in her 60s with only very distant Irish ancestry, recalled being very curious about all matters linguistic, including Irish, in her youth. She was particularly interested in folklore and went on to take Celtic Studies at university:

A3: Is cuimhin liom gur léigh mé leabhartha a bhí sa leabharlann phoiblí faoi scéalta traidisiúnta na hÉireann agus {is} cuimhin liom go raibh rud mar ghluais ag i gcúl an leabhar amháin acu *so* agus *you know* chonaic mé na focail agus ní raibh siad Béarla ach *you know* ní raibh a fhios agam go díreach goidé a bhí i gceist [...] Bhí suim agam i rudaí mar an rí Artúir bhí léigh mé scéaltaí faoin faoin ghaisce Fionn Mac Cumhaill gach rud rud ar bith mar sin.

A3: I remember reading books in the public library about traditional Irish stories and I remember that there was a thing like a glossary at the back of one book so and you know I saw the words and they weren’t English but you know I didn’t know exactly what it was [...] I was interested in things like King Arthur I was I read stories about the feats of Fionn Mac Cumhaill all sorts of things like that.

C1 was one of only two participants who could not say with certainty that she had any Irish-American heritage, but she had experienced a strong emotional connection with Irish music and the Irish language while in Ireland. In the following extract, she described her first experience of visiting the Gaeltacht before she had begun to learn Irish in earnest:

C1: Nuair a bhí siad ag caint agus bhí mé ag éisteacht *just* bhí cineál draíocht ann agus *just* sa nóiméad sin sa bhomaite sin bhí mé ag iarraidh an teanga sin a fhoghlaim agus *just* bhí sé iontach tábhachtach [...] bhí mé

ag fágáil [ainm na háite] agus ag dul trasna na cnoic sin agus bhí orm an carr a stopadh agus bhí tháinig *just* an mothúchán chomh mór orm agus bhí orm dul stopadh agus [...] bhí mé i mo sheasmh ar an bhóthar agus *just* ag caoineadh agus ní thuigim é [...] Caithfidh mé a rá go ndeachaigh an ceol go bhfeidhm orm fosta.

C1: When they were talking and I was listening there was just a kind of magic there and just at that moment I wanted to learn that language and it was just really important [...] I was leaving [place] and going over those hills and I had to stop the car and just such a strong feeling came over me and I had to stop and [...] I was standing on the side of the road just crying and I don't understand it [...] I have to say that the music influenced me too.

Music was also an important motivational factor for D1, a 51-year-old unaware of any Irish ancestry. She was one of the less-fluent speakers in the sample, reverting to English for parts of the interview:

D1: I get a tremendous sense of connection to a culture that means a great deal to me because of my love of the music and to the history of that culture and to the history of you know people who also helped shape my country you know and as I said it has become to a great extent a part of me. I started learning Irish because I was interested in music I continued learning Irish because I fell in love with the language and the culture and so making that a deeper part of me is huge.

Despite her lack of fluency, D1 spoke about Irish in deeply emotional and spiritual terms and it was clear that she had expended a great effort in acquiring the language to date.

## 5.4 Sociolinguistic awareness

D2 reported only very distant Irish ancestry but was one of the more highly competent speakers of the sample, probably aided by his decision to speak Irish to his son (see Section 4.2). Irish had become a means of connecting with Irish people, despite his awareness of the sociolinguistic reality that not everyone in Ireland shared his interest:

D2: Tá sé mar chuid lámach agamsa anois. Ar bhealach tá sé aisteach go bhfuil Meiriceánach ag foghlaim teanga nach bhfuil anseo agus cultúr nach bhfuil anseo ach ar bhealach eile tuigim tá daoine in Éirinn nach

bhfuil siad ag iarraidh an teanga agus an cultúr áitiúil a thabhairt ar bord iontu féin agus is dócha ar bhealach is rud atá foghlamtha é an cultúr agus teanga. Is rud is féidir le aon duine a fhoghlaim. Agus smaoiním ar an bhealach sin go bhfuil mé Éireannach ar bhealach is duine Éireannach ar bhealach mé giota beag *you know*. LF.

D2: It's a central part of me now. In a way it's strange that an American is learning a language that is not here and a culture that is not here but in another way I understand that there are people in Ireland who do not want to take the local language and culture on board and I guess in a way culture and language are learnable things. It is a thing that anyone can learn. And I think in that way that I am kind of Irish in a way I am an Irish person a little bit you know. LF.

It may be significant that D2 uses 'Éireannach' rather than 'Gaelach' when referring to Irish identity based on language. His sense of becoming 'kind of Irish' ('Éireannach ... giota beag' rather than 'Gaelach') could illustrate empathy with Irish people who struggle to reclaim their heritage language. 'Éireannach' for him may be a more appropriate term than 'Gaelach' for someone who has attempted to acquire Irish but whose primary identity may not be based on the language. D2's decision to speak Irish to his son may also reveal the perception that Irish is a threatened language and needs new speakers:

D2: Níl a fhios agam b'fhéidir nuair atá sé fásta suas go mbeadh an-suim aige sa nGaeilge ach ar a laghad beidh an rogha sin aige agus tá súil agam go leanfaidh sé ar aghaidh leis b'fhéidir go mbeidh *you know* glúin eile Gaeilgeoirí eile ag teacht lá éigin.

D2: I don't know perhaps when he is grown up that he will be very interested in Irish but at least he will have that option and I hope that he carries on with it perhaps you know that there will be another generation of Irish speakers coming along some day.

Other participants also revealed an awareness of the weak position of Irish as a community language.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper reveals a variety of backgrounds, practices and motivations in relation to new speakers of Irish in the United States. Most of the participants

reported only distant Irish ancestry, a minority had Irish-born parents or grandparents and a smaller minority reported no Irish-American heritage at all. Practices ranged from occasional social use within limited learners' networks to more regular and widespread use including the adoption of Irish as a family language.

The strongest motivation to learn and speak Irish was Irish-American ancestry, although it is clear that this alone does not predicate an interest in the language, let alone a desire to make active use of it. Motivations and practices were interlinked in the sample, with some participants demonstrating considerable dedication to becoming new speakers while others were clearly less committed. The less engaged speakers appeared to view Irish as a hobby, important in terms of their identity but not crucially so, whereas others were deeply committed to Irish as a form of self-actualisation and were creating opportunities to use it at every turn, sometimes in their own families.

Therefore, while most participants referred to the extrinsic motivation of Irish-American heritage or related factors such as Gaelic identity and traditional music, this is only part of the story. Some participants appeared to draw on deeper and more powerful intrinsic motivations such as sustained personal commitment and dedication in order to become or remain new speakers of Irish, often in the face of considerable financial or geographical difficulties (for instance cost of courses, lack of learning resources or distance from the Gaeltacht, etc.). The greater the personal dedication and effort expended, the higher the competence attained. This in turn seemed to spur speakers onto the 'next level' of commitment, for instance deciding to raise their children in Irish and/or attempting to manage the language practices and beliefs of others (Ní Dhúda 2010).

The data suggests that strong intrinsic motivation and considerable dedication are required to become and remain a new speaker of Irish, particularly abroad where the opportunities for socialisation are even more limited than they are in Ireland.

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