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Title	The making of Irish-speaking Ireland: The cultural politics of belonging, diversity and power
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Publication Date	2012
Publication Information	Warren, S. (2012) 'The making of Irish-speaking Ireland: The cultural politics of belonging, diversity and power'. <i>Ethnicities</i> , 12 (3):317-334.
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/4943">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/4943</a>
DOI	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1468796811419597">http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1468796811419597</a>

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## **The making of Irish-speaking Ireland - belonging, diversity and power**

### **Introduction**

A group of parents in West Kerry are taking legal proceedings against Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne for the enforcement of their all-Irish policy at the new public school which opened last September in Dingle.

Concerned Parents of Chorca Dhuibhne (CPCD) have been lobbying for a change in school all-Irish teaching policy for several months, requesting that a bilingual stream be made available for students (The Dingle News Blog 8.1.08).

The intransigence shown at Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne shows a meanness of spirit not usually associated with our education system or the people of that wonderful part of the world. The school has set itself up as a kind of Finsbury Park Mosque by the sea, where cultural intransigence and exclusion is advanced as a group claiming what it perceives to be their rights (Irish Examiner 2007).

In 2009 the Irish Government published a draft 20 year Strategy for the Irish Language (Roinne Gnóthaí Pobail Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta/Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs 2009) reaffirming the status of Irish as the first language of the state whilst recognising English as the majority language. The draft strategy follows on an earlier 'Statement on the Irish Language' in 2006 (Government of Ireland/Rialtas na hÉireann 2006) which

similarly affirmed the Government's commitment to supporting and developing the Irish language. For the purposes of this paper I want to highlight a number of aspects of these two documents as they relate to the local politics of language that forms the primary focus of my discussion. The 'Statement on the Irish Language' commits the Irish government to strengthening the main Irish-speaking regions (the Gaeltacht) as areas defined primarily in terms of the Irish language within an overarching commitment to support all citizens of the state to be bilingual in both Irish and English. The role of the education system in achieving this objective is highlighted as central. The more recent draft strategy repeats these commits. In addition it aims to increase the number of daily speakers of Irish through a phased and targeted strategy of 'normalisation' whereby Irish increasingly becomes a habitual and accepted language in a range of important social domains including family life, community, business, education and government. The strategy gives some priority to the role of education within this process of normalisation. Related to this the strategy reaffirms the importance of maintaining and strengthening the Gaeltacht regions, including the continuation of the policy of providing all students in Gaeltacht schools with the opportunity to receive their education through the medium of Irish. Therefore Irish-medium education in the Gaeltacht is given special importance. How Irish-medium education and the Gaeltacht were constituted as key institutional drivers of language planning in post-independence Ireland will be a central feature of my discussion.

As the Irish government was affirming the status of Irish and the importance of both the Gaeltacht as a particular linguistically defined region and the

importance of Irish-medium education a case was being heard in the High Court in the Republic of Ireland. The case was brought to the High Court by a group of parents, acting for their children, against the language policy adopted by the Board of Management of the community secondary school – Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne<sup>i</sup>, in An Daingean<sup>ii</sup> in the South West of Ireland. The central issue at stake in this case, as presented by the 88 parents who signed the High court petition, was that the civil and human rights of their children to education were being denied to them because of the school's policy of Irish-medium education. Essentially, the opportunity to succeed educationally, and therefore economically, was denied them by being required to undertake their secondary school education through the medium of Irish rather than English. I will return to the cultural and administrative context within which this legal argument took place. For the moment I want to draw out another dimension of this case. This is also about the contest between two sets of 'rights' that are set up in antagonistic opposition whereby one set of rights is seen to be achieved at the expense of the other. The right of Irish speakers to have their children educated through Irish is seen to be antagonistic to those (both Irish and non Irish-speakers) who want their children educated through English. This leads to the central question explored in this article. How is it, in a geographical region where Irish has protected status and where Irish has been the medium of education since 1922, that Irish-medium education becomes the focus for an impassioned politics of language?

### *Naming the problem*

The group taking the school to court has named itself the 'Concerned Parents of Corca Dhuibhne'. Immediately an implied distinction is set up between those parents who are 'concerned' and those who by inference are not. In terms of the discourse being set up here being concerned means demanding that your child receive education through English. But the school is located in the town of An Daingean in the Gaeltacht region of Corca Dhuibhne. The Gaeltacht (singular), Gaeltachtaí (plural) are the geographic areas where Irish is the majority language. They are the areas which have the greatest concentration of traditional Irish-speaking communities. As noted above the most recent 'Statement on the Irish Language' by the Irish Government reiterates the close relationship between the maintenance of the language and the special status accorded the Gaeltacht regions. Furthermore the 1998 Education Act (Government of Ireland/Rialtas na hÉireann 1998) explicitly designates Irish as the medium of education in the Gaeltacht. In addition, the Official Languages Act 2003 (Government of Ireland/Rialtas na hÉireann 2003) not only affirms Irish as the first official language of the Irish state but makes it a requirement of all public bodies to provide services through the medium of Irish, with a special emphasis on this being the case in the Gaeltacht. So, it might have been expected that when a new community secondary school, Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne, opened its doors, this would be a cause for local celebration. The new school was formed from the amalgamation of the two separate girls' and boy's schools in the town and the setting up of a co-educational community school in new premises. Instead, the school has been shrouded in controversy since before its doors opened. The focus of this mobilisation was the school's

policy of ‘Oideachas lán-Ghaeilge’ – that the medium of education would be Irish. The Concerned Parents group emerged arguing that the board of management of the Pobalscoil had imposed an intolerant all-Irish policy upon students and parents alike (Warren 2010 forthcoming). Their demands focused on a return to the situation they said had pertained in the previous two schools of ‘tolerance’ towards the use of English, a situation that they described as bilingual<sup>iii</sup>. Within the first months of the new school year the Concerned Parents group organised two public meetings. At both meetings those speaking in Irish were heckled and jeered. At the second meeting a key member of the group reportedly referred to the school’s policy as ‘ethnic cleansing’. This campaign has caused bitter divisions between people in the area and has become an issue of national importance. Before reaching the High Court both sides in the dispute agreed to a compromise agreement whereby the primacy of Irish as the medium of education remained but that a language support programme would be established to support students with little or no Irish to integrate into the mainstream classes. Why the politics of language should manifest itself in this particular form is the focus of this article.

### *Looking beyond the local*

This apparently parochial case has to be seen as a localised instance of a more general issue relating to minoritised languages across the globe, and therefore the health and wellbeing of linguistically-based communities. I deliberately use the term ‘minoritised’ rather than ‘minority’ in order to highlight the essentially political processes that produce certain peoples as a minority. The specific historical processes that have constructed Irish-speakers as a minority within

their own country will be addressed later. For the moment it is important to understand that the events occurring in An Daingean, and the discourses deployed as part of a cultural politics of identity recognition, are repeated across many locations (see Nettle & Romaine 2000; Price 1984). For instance, Nettle and Romaine (2000) comment on the rise of particularly powerful metropolitan languages across the world associated with dominant economic and political classes and locations. Consequently, they argue, when we look at the changing geography of language use globally we are witnessing the concentration of economic and political power. In contrast to this peripheral languages are restricted to the economically less developed zones, their languages restricted to less powerful functional roles. Globalisation, therefore, can be viewed as the rise of a particular kind of economic, political and cultural globalisation centred largely in Anglo-phone nodal points and the expansion of English as not just a dominant, but a 'killer' language (Price 1984).

Robert Mann, writing in this journal in 2008, deals with some of these issues when he draws attention to the relationship between in-migration, language learning and civic responsibility in Wales (Mann 2008). Mann reports on the phenomena of English-speakers moving in to Welsh-speaking communities and the impact on these communities of the resistance to learning Welsh. This has generated a broader political debate with some antagonists arguing that Welsh language activists are racist. The starting point for Mann's article is the introduction of a requirement in the UK for migrants to learn English. Mann makes a distinction between the UK and Welsh cases. He notes that in the UK case the learning of English is constructed as a means for migrants to access

the majority culture and to be integrated into British political and civil society. The Welsh case is different in that the Welsh language is positioned as a minority regional language in a predominantly English-speaking polity. Because of this positioning of Welsh majority English-speakers tend therefore to feel legitimised in resisting any requirement to learn Welsh. Rather than understand this as part of a discourse of choice Mann argues that it reflects the asymmetrical relation of power between majority English-speakers and Welsh bilingual speakers. Put simply, majority English-speakers feel no need to make accommodations to the minority language. It is the responsibility of minority language users to make accommodation to dominant and powerful languages. Mann's account has similarities with the political discourses generated and deployed around the Irish-medium language policy of the community secondary school Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne. As I will seek to demonstrate later, this localised politics of language reflects and articulates a deeper conflict around the political and cultural identity of Ireland. As in the case of Wales, long term structural change has transformed both the economic and demographic conditions of existence of linguistically-based communities. Consequently, language becomes a key nodal point around which politics is constituted. As is seen elsewhere in the world this politics of language all too often is configured as a struggle between a dominant and a subjugated language community. This perspective is substantiated by the fact that although the school operates under specific legislation that promotes and privileges Irish, those supporting the school's Irish-medium education policy are put in a position of having to 'defend' this position.



In order to examine the question that drives this article: why do the politics of language present themselves in this particular form?, I want to examine the way Irish-speaking Ireland has been differently constructed as an object of discourse arising out of processes of state forming and state making. By approaching the question in this way I aim to demonstrate that the discursive and administrative forms that Irish-speaking Ireland takes are a consequence of a struggle to organise and dominate a field of meaning. The particular forms this struggle takes, and therefore the particular forms that Irish-speaking Ireland takes, are dependent on historically constituted resources. The article will be organised in the following way. The first section will look at the making of Irish-speaking Ireland as an object of nationalist discourse in the process of state formation, as an essential element in asserting a legitimate claim for statehood based on the idea of a cohesive national identity as represented in the 'authentic' Irish-speakers of the West of Ireland. In this section I will also outline how the process of state making, following Ireland's partial independence, required a process of marking the symbolic boundaries of Irish-speaking Ireland in the form of linguistically defined regions; and sought to use the new state as a means of elevating the functional status of Irish. Particular attention will be paid to the role of formal education. In the next section I will go on to examine the re-making of Irish-speaking Ireland. I focus on particular aspects – the way that the material conditions of existence of Irish-speaking communities is in tension with the symbolic formation of Irish-speaking Ireland as an archive of national identity; the way that the town of An Daingean has been an historical site for contestation around the language.

## **The making of 'Irish-speaking Ireland'**

In this section I want to explore how Irish-speaking Ireland is a political and social construct. I want to approach it in this way in order to break with the suggestion that language shift, the process of one language replacing another, is somehow a 'natural' or 'evolutionary' phenomena. I want to argue that Irish-speaking Ireland is a product of the political, economic and cultural dominance of English both in its historical form as the language of colonialism but also in its current form as the language of global neo-liberal dominance (Grillo 1989; May 2001; Pennycook 1994).

Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker 1996; 2004) challenges the tendency within both political and academic discourse to view 'groups', ethnic, national or linguistic, as distinct bounded entities with agency and interests. He argues that this substantialist approach invokes a kind of primordial conception of ethnicity, suggesting that people belong to fixed ethnic or national groups that are characterised by common descent and language (see Jenkins 1997; May 2001). Brubaker asserts that group identification is something we should be trying to explain, not the conceptual tools with which we seek to explain social phenomena. Indeed, Brubaker goes on to show that used as categories of analysis, such concepts are the means by which ethnopolitical entrepreneurs seek to constitute group identity as distinct (from others) and natural (Brubaker 2004:10). Instead, argues Brubaker, as analysts we need to view groupness as events, things that happen, as practices of group identification. As such we do not need to reject group identifications such as ethnicity, nation or linguistic

community as no more than social constructs, but instead our job is to take account of the practices that constitute groupness in particular ways, and to explain the conditions under which identities become reified, that is understand them as categories of practice. Brubaker poses the question though as to how we then explain 'ethnic conflict'. As with May and Jenkins he suggests that we do not need to deny the sense of ethnic identities as primary categories of experience. Brubaker says that we need to attend not to whether these events are, or are not 'ethnic' but to how they are definitional struggles, struggles over whether they are framed ethnically (24-26). This is similar to the conception of the political proposed by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Laclau & Mouffe 2001; Mouffe 1993; 2007) which suggest that we look at situations such as that around the Pobalscoil as struggles over a field of meaning. Informed by Brubaker and Laclau and Mouffe I want to move on now to explore the making of Irish-speaking Ireland in terms of discursive frames, institutional forms, political projects, and contingent events.

### *Nationalist politics and Irish-speaking Ireland as national archive*

The association between Irish-speaking Ireland and the geographical concentration of Irish-speaking communities in the Gaeltacht is a product of both demographic and political change. There is not room here to detail the long process of colonial domination of Ireland and how this actively subjugated not only its people but the language as well. Others have examined this relationship elsewhere (Mac Giolla Chríost 2005; May 2001; Ó Riagáin 1997). One of the significant consequences of this has been that Irish increasingly became the language of the economically peripheral western sea board of

Ireland. Importantly, it came to be associated with poverty, marginalisation and emigration. It was in this context that people increasingly adopted English as the language of progress and modernisation. But as Nettle and Romaine (2000: 142) argue, people ‘...did choose English, repeatedly and consistently, but did not themselves choose the conditions under which they had to choose’.

It is against this background that the Irish nationalist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sought to invoke the idea of a collective and unitary Irish people bearing the symbolic right to nationhood sharing a similar descent and cultural identity. Others have charted the inclusion of the Irish language movement within a broader nationalist movement (see for instance Johnson 1998). The Irish nationalist movement shared many of the primordial conceptions of the relations between ethnicity and nationhood current at that time. In particular the Irish nationalist movement articulated the 19<sup>th</sup> Century belief in the congruence between nation and state, that there should be congruence between the boundaries of the political state and the nation as defined in ethnic terms, and imagined in terms of linguistic homogeneity. This is a historically recent phenomena and relatively unique to political nationalism. The Irish nationalist movement can be seen to embody both the political nationalism of the French Revolution, especially with its clearly Republican stance, and the cultural nationalism associated with German Romanticism. Ó Croidheáin (2006), for instance, locates the Irish cultural revivalist movement in a wider nationalist sentiment, in particular the association of the Irish language with the unbroken Gaelic heritage in the form of the Irish rural population, especially that located in the Gaeltacht regions. Similarly, Nuala Johnson

(1994:174) has noted how the Gaeltacht regions emerged as 'the archive of Irish identity' within a wider European nationalist ferment.

Therefore Irish-speaking Ireland and the Gaeltacht in particular has been an important part of the Irish political and cultural imaginary, representing one nodal point around which a politics of national identity and national independence was mobilised. This mobilisation involved what Edward Said (1993) calls the charting of a cultural territory involving the reconstruction of a unitary national past or what Homi Bhabha (1994: 167) refers to as a 'language of archaic belonging'. This involved not only the reconstruction of Irish identity that looked back to a Gaelic past as well as being politically modern, but also entailed the construction of this identity in opposition to the English language. Although practical measures had been achieved, for instance the introduction of Irish-medium education into the colonial education system, Irish-speaking Ireland was largely constructed as a symbolic space of authentic cultural identity.

### *Making the state - Making Irish-speaking Ireland*

It was the establishment of an independent Irish state that saw Irish-speaking Ireland constructed through a range of institutional measures, with education playing the key role. The decline in Irish as the common vernacular was partly achieved by securing English as the language of political and economic power, imposing English as the medium of education, and winning the consent of the Irish middle class. This involved diminishing the domains within which Irish was

used, relegating it to mainly private use or as the vernacular of the economically and politically marginalised, therefore reducing its functional importance. The new Irish state instituted measures that sought to introduce Irish as a language of power and to give it functional importance (Mac Giolla Chríost 2005; Ó Riagáin 1992). Economic regeneration in Irish-speaking regions aimed to stem the out-migration of Irish-speakers, thereby strengthening the Gaeltacht as the heart of Irish-speaking Ireland. Initially this aimed to bolster the system of small family farms that was the bases of the Irish economy. Later strategies placed more emphasis on small-scale industrial development. Institutionally this was enabled by the establishment of the Gaeltacht as distinct linguistically defined areas. Bourdieu (2007: 223) makes the point that the definition of geographical regions is arbitrary in the sense that although the lines drawn on a map may correspond in some way to objective factors, the process of distinction relates to the conditions of the relations of power – who has the power to define. Where a frontier is drawn, in what particular form it takes, represents one moment in the struggle of meaning of that region and territory within which it is situated. In the case of the Gaeltacht frontiers were drawn that reflected the concentration of Irish-speakers in distinct geographical areas, but did not take account of the actual patterns of language use (Ó Riagáin 1997: 50). Therefore the boundaries of the Gaeltacht were not based on actual language-use but rather on assumptions about the potential for language shift towards Irish in communities contiguous to the areas of Irish-language concentration. Therefore they represented the political and cultural aspirations of the commissioners more than the realities of language use on the ground. A recent

linguistic study of the Gaeltacht has made proposals that could see a revision of the geographical shape of the Gaeltacht (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2007).

The new state tried to increase the functional value of Irish through two means. The standardisation and modernisation of Irish reflected a desire to make Irish in the image of established European languages, a language fit for nationhood. Part of the impetus for this was the requirement for legislation and key government documents to be translated into Irish. The Parliamentary Translation Office set up in 1925 built on the work of the pre-independence language revival movement in basing the literary form on the spoken language of the Gaeltacht Irish-speaking communities, thereby reinforcing the idea of these areas as the 'archive of the nation'. Alongside this Irish was promoted as the nominal language of the state. Competence in Irish was a requirement of entry to the civil service, the police, military, teaching, and admission to University. Given that the majority of post-independence Ireland was based on small family farms, the public sector was one area where the new state could construct an Irish-speaking middle class cohort. This would have the dual effect of giving the language both status and functional value. However, this remained largely nominal and symbolic and even in the Gaeltacht public services were seldom delivered through Irish.

But it was education that carried the burden of creating an Irish-speaking Ireland as a national, and not just a regional entity. More than any other area of language policy, the place of the Irish language in education was a focus for politico/cultural struggle from the beginning (Kelly 2002). The rationale for the

strategy was that Irish in the Gaeltacht regions would be sustained through Irish-medium education while the language would grow in the predominantly English-speaking areas initially through immersion education, and latterly through the teaching of Irish as a subject. This was partly predicated on a strategy of Irish-language use spreading increasingly from the traditional Irish-speaking areas to the adjoining bilingual areas. These would become predominantly Irish-speaking and so the process would go on. Joshua Fishman (Fishman 1997) has remarked on the tendency in reverse-language shift movements to overemphasise the role of formal education, particularly at the expense of encouraging and supporting intergenerational transmission in the family and community. Whilst some have argued that the policy of reviving the language through the education system has failed, and indeed hold the Irish case up as an example of the futility of reverse-language shift strategies (see Edwards 1985; Kelly 2002), it can be seen to have had some positive, if unexpected consequences for the distribution of Irish-speakers. This aspect will be explored later. The main point I want to make here is that education became a key strategy in the political and cultural construction of Irish-speaking Ireland. I want to argue that the construction of Irish-speaking Ireland as a symbolic space, with its heart in the Gaeltacht as the archive of the nation established the basis for a tension with the socio-economic conditions for the political project of state making.

### **The re-making of Irish-speaking Ireland?**



In this section I want to consider the way Irish-speaking Ireland as a discursive construct is being re-made. In particular I want to focus on three aspects of this process of re-construction. I want to argue that the struggle around the community school's language policy occurs in a context of political contestation of the Irish state's linguistic policies. Furthermore, I want to suggest that this political contestation is related to the structural change in the region, both economic and social; and to the changing structure of Irish-speaking Ireland nationally. My aim is to demonstrate that in order to understand the particularity of the local struggle around the school's language policy we have to situate it within a wider network of meaning.

*It's all in the name – linguistic policy and community identity*

I want to begin by situating the political mobilisation around the community school's language policy in the context of a constellation of language related political struggles. To use the name An Daingean is to immediately signal the cultural/political position of this author. The town of An Daingean had been gripped by an ongoing campaign focused on recent legislation where it appeared that the 'official' name of the town change from the English version 'Dingle' to the Irish form 'An Daingean'. The Official Languages Act 2003 was the first piece of major legislation in Ireland to throw weight behind the status of Irish as the first official language of the Irish state. The Act actually gave English and Irish joint recognition, therefore providing legal protection for English, but it was the clause on the naming of towns, villages and townlands<sup>iv</sup> that was to create a political conflict in An Daingean. The Act passed through both houses of the Irish parliament without opposition. The Act required that in

interactions between citizens and the State in the Gaeltacht regions Irish would be the official language of communication. Consequently, a record had to be compiled of the Irish form of names by which State bodies would recognise localities, the names through which the post office could deliver letters, land be registered, electoral registers enumerated. Other provisions within the Act required that official publications be bi-lingual (Irish and English) and that if a citizen communicated with State bodies (which includes local authorities) in Irish then that citizen should expect all further communication from the State body to be in Irish. However, An Daingean was already the official Irish name of the town since the 1970s, witnessed in part by the fact that many road signs in the Gaeltacht used the Irish form An Daingean and signs pointing to An Daingean used the bilingual form Dingle/An Daingean. What the Act changed was that not only would all road signs *within* the Gaeltacht only use the Irish form but that those pointing to the town along main arterial routes would also only use the Irish form<sup>v</sup>. The symbolic and instrumental status accorded Irish through this Act should not be underestimated, and the material investment involved has not gone without comment. The Act reverses a trend in the Irish state's relationship with the language. In the previous section I noted how the State itself was used as a vehicle for promoting the language through the creation of an Irish-speaking professional middle class. In part this had the effect of raising the functional importance of Irish. The election of the Fine Gael<sup>vi</sup> government in 1973 saw a concerted effort to rein back the State's role in the promotion of Irish. This was to have a major impact on those aspects of linguistic policy that had given Irish some degree of functional importance. Consequently, the mandatory Irish language test for entry to the Civil Service and local

government was ended, as was the requirement for a pass grade in Irish in order to gain the end of compulsory schooling qualification. This retreat of the State from anything but symbolic support for Irish was a feature of all Irish governments from the 1950s onwards and in any case has often been uneven in its intensity (see for instance Mac Giolla Chríost 2005; Ó Riagáin 1997). The Official Languages Act goes some way to restoring the functional status of Irish. If State bodies need to be capable of providing services through the medium of Irish, then this will raise the importance of Irish language competency.

An Daingean became the only place in the Irish state where the Irish form of the name became a political issue<sup>vii</sup>. There is not space here to elaborate on the politics of the campaign around the town's name. Two features, though, are important to note. Opposition came initially from two separate groups. A 'business' lobby argued that the name of Dingle was a trade mark, invaluable to the marketing of the town as a tourist destination and so wanted the town to be exempt from the place-name provisions of the Act. A number of key individuals in this grouping had long-term links with land developers who had for some time looked for the local County Council to drop the Irish language policy in relation to housing in the Gaeltacht area, which required a certain proportion of housing had to be retained for Irish speakers so as not to weaken the language as a community vernacular. The second group comprised native Irish speakers from the town who objected to the Place Names order on the grounds that it was the incorrect Irish version and instead argued for the legitimacy of the alternative name Daingean Uí Chúise. An alliance between the two groups was eventually formed. Opposition to the name change became inextricably linked to a local

County Councillor who represented the Fine Gael political party. Despite arguments from this alliance that the campaign had nothing to do with the language, local political mobilisation was largely organised along language lines. This reached its peak in the 2007 General Election where the local Fine Gael councillor unsuccessfully stood for the Dáil (the Irish Parliament). The political tradition in the area had been to support the 'local' man. As a native Irish-speaker, and the only 'local' candidate it would have been expected that he receive substantial support from the Gaeltacht. While his vote grew in An Daingean, a significant proportion of his vote was taken by Sinn Féin who, despite being organisationally weak, had campaigned vigorously in support of strengthening the status of the Irish language. The heartland of the Irish language in the area had turned, in significant numbers, towards those who had stood for a stronger position for the language. The significance of the linguistic geography of the area and the contested position of An Daingean in the Gaeltacht will be dealt with later. The stage was set then, for a vociferous campaign around the Pobalscoil<sup>viii</sup>.

### *Irish-speaking Ireland as inheritance of linguistic struggle*

The construction of Gaeltacht politics around opposition to Irish-medium education and a major piece of Irish language legislation sits at odds with a different attempt to re-make Irish-speaking Ireland. From the 1960s onwards Gaeltacht communities became increasingly angry at the disparity between the rhetoric of Government in relation to the economic, linguistic and cultural health of the Gaeltacht regions, and the reality of policy. In relation to economic development Nuala Johnson (1998) notes a subtle change in emphasis from

Government seeing the Gaeltacht as national archive to it being viewed in deficit terms requiring special measures. In the context of civil rights movements in the USA local anger at regional and cultural injustice led to the establishment of the Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement - Cearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta. Much of the economic, cultural and linguistic infrastructure associated with the Gaeltacht is a direct result of social activism in Gaeltacht communities (Delap 2008; Johnson 1998; Ryan 2003). Economically this manifested itself in terms of local co-operatives not only in the traditional industries of fishing and farming, but cultural industries and tourism. Social activism also saw the establishment of important cultural and linguistic infrastructure in the formation of the Irish language radio and television stations, Raidió na Gaeltachta and TG4. While successive Irish governments had voiced support for an Irish language radio station, the establishment of a pirate radio by local activists in Connemara forced the Government's hand on this. Similarly, it was the programme of political mobilisation and protest in the 1980s that led to the founding of TG4 as the Irish language television station. Breandán Delap (2008) has noted the emergence of a vibrant Irish language cultural industry. Indeed, the Official Languages Act 2003 can be seen as a culmination of the civil rights agitation of the 1960s and 1980s. This might be called a language from below movement. Michael Cronin (2006), in the forward to Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin's book *Language from Below: The Irish Language, Ideology and Power in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Ireland*, notes, that without this movement from below 'there would be no Irish-language schools, no Irish-language radio stations, no Irish-language television, no Irish-language press' (11). Consequently, despite the recognised limitations of reliance on the education system to secure

intergenerational transmission of Irish, Irish-medium education was still perceived as a necessary element in the civil rights of the Gaeltacht. Therefore, any move to weaken the status of Irish at the Pobalscoil would become a focus for political mobilisation.

*Changing linguistic communities - structural change*

‘As it is today, you had to go to the right places in Dingle to hear Irish’ (Ó Dubhshláine 2005: 21)

‘Many of the people from outside the village didn’t feel comfortable when they visited the village for business or entertainment, feeling they were being laughed at because they spoke Irish’ (Ó Dubhshláine 2005: 25)

These are extracts from Mícheál Ó Dubhshláine’s book *‘A Dark Day on the Blaskets’* refer to the contested presence of Irish in Corca Dhuibhne in the early 1900s. Yet the book is about a member of the largely urban-based middle class Irish revival movement visiting the area in order to learn Irish. A form of cultural tourism had developed in the Gaeltacht regions. But, as the quotes suggest, Corca Dhuibhne, as with the whole of Ireland, had been experiencing a process of language shift, a historical process of shift in the common vernacular from Irish to English. This process of language shift is inexorably bound up with the Irish experience of British colonial rule. The second extract above relates to a process of language shift where, by the 1900’s English as the dominant

language was moving westwards from An Daingean in to the heart of the Irish-speaking Gaeltacht.

‘Well, Shaun,’ said she, ‘I always thought you had some sense until today, and you to do such a thing to the poor boy. In the first place he will lose his English, and so he will be a fool when he grows up a stripling, if he lives so long. Where will he go, and how will he get work without the English?’ (O’Sullivan 2000: 17)

The above quote reiterates the attitude towards Irish in An Daingean at this period. The quote is taken from the autobiographical account of Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, who was born on the Great Blasket Island on the far end of the Corca Dhuibhne peninsula. The extract recounts the moment when Muiris’ father came to collect him in order to take him back to the island after some years living in An Daingean following the death of his mother. At the time the Great Blasket Island was home to a fully Irish-speaking community. The words are uttered by Muiris’ primary school teacher. They clearly signal the unequal relationship between Irish and English, and foreshadow the debates around the Pobalscoil.

An Daingean, and the wider Gaeltacht region, therefore, have been historically constructed as sites of contestation over the Irish language. This contested nature of Irish can be detected in the strength of Irish within the town itself. There is evidence that within Corca Dhuibhne, and particularly in An Daingean, there is a close association between local cultural identity and language (Ó Riagáin 1992, 1997). However, this association is complex. The strength of Irish as a vernacular language was historically stronger west of the town where

there were also higher rates of intergenerational language transmission. Even in the town there was much higher usage of Irish language amongst those who had moved in from the west. Consequently there was a stronger association between the Irish language and Gaeltacht identity to the west of the town than in An Daingean itself. But, even in the west, only slightly more than 50% of parents raised their children through Irish, and within this, the younger age group were less likely to do so. So, high-levels of support for Irish do not automatically translate in to socialisation of children through Irish. In his 1997 study Ó Riagáin noted that An Daingean was always an English-majority town serving an Irish-speaking region to the west. The 2007 'Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht' similarly highlights the ambiguous position of An Daingean in the Gaeltacht (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2007). Compared to the districts west of the town An Daingean is typified as an area where Irish has limited use as a community or institutional language, though Irish remains an important language in some social networks and in education. Therefore the role of the Irish language in the community school could be seen to impinge directly on parental desires for their children's well-being, making it a focus for policy contestation.

The decline of the language within the Gaeltacht region is linked to the changing economic base that produced the particular social relations that sustained the use of Irish in the region. One way of looking at this is the changing structure of farming in post-independence Ireland. The pattern of land ownership following independence has largely remained in place. Within this pattern the West of Ireland, including Corca Dhuibhne, were characterised by



small family farming, often on unproductive land. The process of political and economic integration in to the European Union further consolidated this pattern of ownership and accelerated the decline in the economic viability of the Gaeltacht regions (Crowley 2006). The Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht witnessed a shift from 90% of the male workforce being in farming or fishing in 1926 to just 42% in 1981. By 1981 the service sector in An Daingean comprised 62% of the economy. While the surrounding rural areas declined in population, An Daingean grew, seeing a net increase in non-Irish speakers (Ó Riagáin 1992, 1997). In contrast, by 1981 45% of women and 1/3 of men aged 10-19 in 1971 had left the western districts around An Daingean. The areas of strongest Irish-speakers were most affected by out-migration. This process has continued.

It is not so much that the population of Corca Dhuibhne has declined, but that the social structure and linguistic distribution has been reconfigured. At the same time that the main Irish-speaking populations continue to decline in the absence of an economy that can sustain these communities, so the area attracts people drawn to the quality of life it offers. Conchúr Ó Giollagáin and Seasmh Mac Donnacha (2008) have noted the changing demographics of the Gaeltacht regions. The natural beauty of the area, and indeed the strength of the vernacular culture have attracted many seeking an alternative lifestyle. This is a highly heterogeneous group including Irish citizens who are competent bilingual Irish speakers. More recently, with the expansion of the European Union, the area has become home to a growing population of Poles, Lithuanians, Slovaks, etc. But another group are those who have moved to the Gaeltacht so that they can raise their children through the medium of Irish.

Areas such as Corca Dhuibhne continue to attract those seeking a living Irish-speaking community because , apart from West Belfast, no sustained Irish-speaking community has emerged outside the Gaeltacht regions (Ó Riagáin 1997). Of most significance to my argument here is the impact of in-migration on education. Recent evidence suggests that ‘English-speaking in-migrants form a large proportion of young Gaeltacht-based parents’ (Ó Giollagáin & Mac Donnacha 2008: 110). This has implications for the linguistic structure of Gaeltacht education and therefore its role in the intergenerational transmission of Irish.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have attempted to show that the meanings we can attach to the specific, local struggle over the language policy of the community school are contingent upon the overlapping flows of history, economy and politics. In part this is to demonstrate that in mobilising opposition to or support for the school’s policy will involve attempts ‘...to weave together different strands of discourse in an effort to dominate or organise a field of meaning so as to fix the identities of objects and practices in a particular way’ (Howarth et al. 2000: 3). The incipient Irish state can be seen to have been involved in a nationalising project, of developing strategies to constitute the Irish polity into a particular nation bound by an language of ‘archaic belonging’. Ultimately this was through institutional arrangements that the political-cultural entity ‘Irish-speaking Ireland’ was constructed – the setting of administrative boundaries that defined a

geographical linguistic space; the elevation of the functional status of Irish; the formation of an Irish-speaking professional middle class; and the role of Irish in the education system to form a population of vernacular Irish-speakers. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue (Laclau & Mouffe 2001) any field of meaning is never fully accomplished. Consequently, the embodiment of Irish-speaking Ireland in the Gaeltacht regions was essentially unstable. The Gaeltacht as the archive of the nation could not resist the underlying structural change that was ongoing. The regular re-drawing of the Gaeltacht boundaries mirrored the dismantling of the economic conditions that sustained the social relations of the Irish-speaking communities of Ireland's western sea board. The irony, of course, is that the geographical and cultural 'difference' of the Gaeltacht would make it attractive to an urban-based population seeking either to relocate or find a temporary escape from the pressures of urban living. As surveys have indicated, these young urbanites have become an increasing proportion of parents of children in Gaeltacht schools, giving rise, I would argue, to demands for English-medium education.

The creation of the Gaeltacht as an archive of the nation, as the symbolic representation of Irish-speaking Ireland, was also unstable due to the historical amnesia this involved. Corca Dhuibhne and An Daingean in particular have been historical sites of contestation over Irish. In the local struggle over Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne we can see two very different ideas of Irish-speaking Ireland, and therefore a struggle over a field of meaning, attempts to dominate and control this field of meaning. On the one hand we have an idea of Irish-speaking Ireland framed by a discourse of civil rights for a linguistic

community (as embodied in Cearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta). On the other we see the deployment of a discourse that frames the issue in terms of individual, and not communal, language rights; of Irish as a minority rights issue and often as a private issue for individual citizens. In retrospect it seems almost inevitable that the language policy of Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne would become a focal point for political struggle. Indeed language has become a nodal point for the constitution and mobilisation of political identity in the area. We can understand the emergence of a constellation of language related issues in the area because the association between Irish, Gaeltacht identity, and Irish national identity can no longer be taken for granted, that any assumed connection between these identifications have been disrupted by structural and cultural change. The long process of economic, cultural, political and demographic change that the area has encountered have forced language issues to the fore, where political identities have to be organised around these issues.

At the beginning of this paper I asked how it was possible for a popular movement against the Irish language to arise in this Irish-speaking region. In conclusion, then, I want to argue that to answer this question it is necessary to escape the limitations of any notion of linguistic choice; that this concept masks the power relations that underly the particular formation of political identity formed around struggles over the Irish language. Secondly, I argue that these power relations are historically formed and are currently articulated through and with contemporary processes of globalisation. Thirdly, it is important to understand that the politics of language has very little to do with language, and

everything to do with struggles to impose particular kinds of order aimed at producing different kinds of social relations and configuration of power.

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<sup>i</sup> Corca Dhuibhne is variously known as West Kerry or the Dingle Peninsula.

<sup>ii</sup> An Daingean is the official Irish language name for the town. The town is more popularly known through its English name of Dingle.

<sup>iii</sup> The use of the term bilingual in these political/cultural struggles has been disputed. It is argued by proponents of Irish medium education that in a context of almost total cultural dominance of English bilingualism can only occur where the minority language – Irish, is privileged.

<sup>iv</sup> A townland is the smallest officially-defined geographical unit of land townlands form the building blocks for higher-level administrative units such as parishes and District Electoral Divisions (in the Republic of Ireland) or wards (in Northern Ireland). The townland name continues to be one of the more important divisions in the Irish postal system and local administration.

<sup>v</sup> After a long campaign that has particularly set the town against the main Irish speaking areas further west the Environment Minister John Gormley published draft legislation as part of the Local government Bill 2010 that would allow the town to be officially know in the bilingual form Dingle /Daingean Uí Chúis.

<sup>vi</sup> Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are the two largest political parties in the Republic of Ireland. Fine Gael emerged out of the political forces that accepted treaty with Britain granting partial independence. Historically Fine Gael has often been viewed as a centre-right party tending to support fiscal restraint and law and order. Fianna Fáil emerged out of the political forces that opposed the treaty with Britain. They have tended to be left of centre on economic matters, tending towards fiscal expansion, while remaining populist on social issues.

<sup>vii</sup> The town of Dún Bleisce in County Limerick successfully challenged the original Place Names Order on the grounds that this was the established and locally recognised Irish form of the town's name. This was accepted by the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. In this dispute there was never any suggestion from local campaigners to maintain the English form of the name as the preferred option.

<sup>viii</sup> The most recent local elections in June 2009 saw a reversal of this situation. Fine Gael increased its political representation in the electoral area covering An Daingean. Sinn Féin lost substantial numbers of votes in the area. This means that the three local County Councillors support a weakening of the State's promotion of Irish.

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