

these will deepen our understanding of migration as an ongoing process and integration as a two-way interaction between the host and the outsiders.

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***A New View of the Irish Language*, edited by Caoilfhionn Nic Pháidín and Seán Ó Cearnaigh, Dublin: Cois Life Teoranta, 2008, 288pp., £28.50 paperback, ISBN 978-1-901176-82-7**

Viewed comparatively from the perspective of a Taiwanese-language activist, the grass must seem much greener (including as a political hue) on that other 'beleaguered isle' where Irish enjoys constitutional status as the first official language. From its inception the Irish state, whilst acknowledging English, declared Irish its national language. There was a commitment to maintain the Irish-speaking region (the Gaeltacht) in the west of Ireland. The new independent state sought to promote or resuscitate the Irish language across the country (where it very much played second fiddle to English). Irish was made a compulsory subject in schools; basic competence in Irish was required for employment in the public sector; efforts were made to modernize and standardize the Irish language; and, to quote Geróid Ó Tuthaigh, 'a range of incentives were introduced to encourage increased competence in Irish within the apparatus of the state'. Since the turn of the current century, there appears to be evidence of the continued valorization of Irish. In 2003, the Official Languages Act was passed, giving the right to provision of public services using the Irish language. In 2007, Irish secured recognition as the 23rd official language of the European Union. According to Suzanne Romaine, 'The 2006 census reports that 1.6 million of the four million population can speak Irish... Proportionately speaking, the numbers represent a remarkable upsurge in the percentage of the Irish-speaking population from 24.5 per cent in 1861 to 41.9 per cent in 2006.' Further, 'in terms of status and the legal framework guaranteeing it... few languages rival Irish.' If we focus upon the status dimension and policy pronouncements and read census statistics selectively, then Irish bucks the general trend of minority languages losing or forfeiting their ethno-linguistic vitality. In these respects, Irish might be viewed as a touchstone against which to gauge the revival or otherwise of, inter alia, the Taiwanese language.

At the other extreme, however, there are those who see Irish more in terms of tombstone than touchstone. They view efforts to revitalize Irish as failing defibrillation for a language suffering a chronic and life-threatening condition. Most prominent of these prophets of doom is Reg Hindley, who pulled no punches in titling his 1990 volume *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary*. Such commentators base their pessimistic prognoses on analyses of survey data among native Irish speakers, and making altogether different sense in how they disambiguate census statistics. When attention shifts from the question about how many can speak Irish to how many actually do speak it, and with what degree of fluency, then an argument that Irish may be in its death throes seems, unlike the language itself, to be sustainable. The policies devised and the measures

implemented over the last century seem ineffectual and may, in fact, contribute to what they were supposedly designed to prevent. The first definitive results of the 2011 Census were released by the Central Statistics Office earlier this year (March 2012). The census found that Irish with 82,600 people speaking it daily outside the school context is *now the third most used language in Ireland*, lagging behind English and the 120,000 or so who speak Polish at home. Even in the Gaeltacht areas, only a third of respondents said they speak Irish on a daily basis outside of the education system. Such findings might well temper the enthusiasm of a Taiwanese-language activist for the Irish-language model as precedent.

Not that surprisingly, the twenty essays that comprise *A New View of the Irish Language* eschew both extremes and give mixed reviews of the contemporary state of play. Overall, verdicts tend toward the view that policy and provision with respect to the Irish language are not so much 'cure it all' as 'curate's egg' (partly bad, but with some redeeming features). According to the two editors, 'the contributors tell the story as it is, a glass both half-empty and half-full' (viii). There's something of the 'blind men describing an elephant' about the collection, as each essayist views the situation from their own partial perspective, providing their own independent storylines and assessments. Thus, Pádraig Ó Riagáin in his piece on 'Irish-language Policy 1922–2007: Balancing Maintenance and Revival' concludes that in Ireland there are 'major problems with both the processes of bilingual production and of bilingual reproduction' (64); Conchúr Ó Giollagáin and Seosamh Mac Donnacha, writing on 'The Gaeltacht Today', lament that 'the Gaeltacht as a linguistic entity is in crisis and struggling with the pressures of an advanced stage of language shift' (119); Suzanne Romaine's thoughtful essay on 'Irish in the Global Context' acknowledges various declines in the language, but opines that 'Irish would certainly be a lot worse off without all the work on its behalf. Most threatened languages will not achieve anything like the relative success of Irish' (24).

Aidan Doyle adopts a condemnatory tone in his piece on 'Modern Irish Scholarship at Home and Abroad', suggesting that deficiencies in Irish scholarship will not be addressed because 'it would mean officially acknowledging that the teaching of Irish has failed across the whole educational system' (206). Also in the realm of education, Anna Ní Ghallachair is concerned about the questionable return on the investment of an average per pupil 1,500 hours of tuition in the Irish language over 13 years (192). This point is reiterated and amplified by John Harris who argues that 'the key challenges... [are of] a significant minority of children fail[ing] to make worthwhile progress in learning to speak Irish and... a substantial long-term decline in standards of proficiency over the last two decades or so' (178).

There is a marked contrast of viewpoint depending on whether the vantage point is from prose or poetry. In a lyrical essay, Liam Ó Muirthile starkly concludes that 'The poem in Irish is in freefall' and goes on to say that 'Literacy in the language has all but collapsed... since 1968' (150). Caoilfhionn Nic Pháidín, whose topic is 'Corpus Planning for Irish – Dictionaries and Terminology' similarly regrets the 'decline in written standards' and reckons that 'the sustainability of any meaningful literacy is now in question' (94). In marked contrast, Máirín Nic Eoin, in writing of 'Prose Writing in Irish Today,' is considerably more upbeat: 'The sheer volume of prose works published in recent years is in itself remarkable...' (131) 'Popular

fiction in Irish today is cool and contemporary...' (133) 'Irish-language journalism is also healthier than ever...' (137). Also, 'there is no indication that the recent flowering of literacy activity in Irish is going to cease...' (138). Lillis Ó Laoire, in her essay, suggests that 'the current situation of music and language in Irish is a moderately healthy one' (130), a prognosis midway between those for prose and poetry.

If the previous three paragraphs feel rather discursive (in the sense of running off in different directions) then, in miniature, this is what the book felt like to me, too. The essays are on twenty different topics. Each has its merits, and there are some tasty morsels in this smorgasbord of a book. Given the wide array of topics, it is inevitable that some essays will appeal to some readers more than others. In their brief foreword, the two editors tell us that 'we adopted the title of *A New View* in honour of the ground-breaking *View of the Irish Language* (1969)... edited by Brian Ó Cuív' (vii). There is something rather quirky about this claim. Only two authors make any substantive reference to the earlier work. And, given the way in which each essayist develops his or her own narrative, like 'the blind men and the elephant', the point seems to be that there is *no singular* viewpoint. Why, then, *A New View*? The viewpoints are multiple, and there has been no attempt to orchestrate or review – or, indeed, allocate a structure to – the score of essays. The whole is not more than the sum of its parts, consequently. I am not suggesting that the essays be shoehorned into consensual convergence, but a critical meta-view or theorized guidance as to how the multiplicity of perspectives might be synthesized to allow a more comprehensive view of the 'elephant' would have been appreciated. The foreword is a mere four pages, rather anodyne in tone, and seems to hover over, rather than engage with, the contributions.

What is lacking is a concerted and *comparative perspective*. Each chapter stands aloof from the others, and the findings of one essay are not compared with those of the others, whether by the authors or the editors. My reading would have benefitted from a directive introduction, and, ideally, a critical reflection on what to make of this batch of essays. There was only occasional reference to the situation of Irish in Northern Ireland, a comparative perspective that could be fruitful, given developments there in the last decade or two. Similarly, Suzanne Romaine's essay aside, there is a dearth of comparative perspective on the situation of minority languages elsewhere. A comparative perspective invokes understanding relationally, an understanding derived not from looking in depth at the thing under scrutiny for an essentialist understanding, but from looking laterally at what that thing isn't, what it's similar to, and how it's significantly different from. An understanding of the Irish language can be enhanced by looking at, for instance, how Welsh or Catalan or, indeed, Taiwanese fare in their separate contexts. Furthermore, to understand the place of Irish in Ireland it is incumbent upon the analyst to research the wider linguistic ecology of the island (and beyond) where English (*the language which Irish is not*) is so dominant, but other languages (Polish and French, in particular) have a significant presence.

Lastly, on the issue of a comparative perspective, I want to address the editors' opening sentence: 'This book is the most substantive, dispassionate overview of the Irish language by practitioners and scholars, in almost forty years' (vii). Is its *substantive* stance one that is to be compared to a *theoretical* perspective, and, for that reason, an excuse for not providing an orchestrated overview of the essays?

Why stress the *dispassionate* nature of the volume? Is this because the book's contributors, without exception, 'speak and write the language fluently and the vast majority use it daily in their professional lives' (ix)? This is hardly a representative sampling, in that case, of the fast-dissolving communities of Irish-speakers. Should a dispassionate view not include the views of English monoglots and others who are not passionate about learning Irish? Ciarán Mac Murchaidh, in his essay on 'Current Attitudes to Irish', gives a flavour of such a counter-position, when he quotes a 16 year-old school student. She stated:

Ireland is not bilingual, and if it ever will be, the second language will be Chinese or Polish, not Gaeilge... In fact I don't think that Irish is alive any more... Nothing irritates me more than all of these great government initiatives to keep Irish alive... foisting the responsibility for upholding a decayed language on us simply isn't fair.
(215)

More such qualitative (quasi-ethnographic?) materials might provide a worthwhile antidote to the quantitative approaches for which Romaine has tailored the epithet 'Irish By The Numbers'.

The Irish government has claimed that Irish is the 'oldest spoken literary language in Europe' (24). Ruairí Ó hUiginn, in his essay on 'The Irish Language' which opens the volume, tells us that 'it has been postulated that the first speakers of Celtic language came to Ireland around 500 BC' (3), and that from 'the late sixth century onwards we have copious written materials in the native vernacular' (4). Till the seventeenth century, Irish was the language of the vast majority of the people of the island, but over the next two centuries the establishment of an English administration and the Plantation of English-speaking settlers led to a marked decline in the proportion of the population speaking Irish. Ó Tuathaigh judges that 'approaching the end to the 19c, Irish as a living language seemed doomed to extinction within a relatively short interval.' (26) Also, 'by the early 20c Irish was spoken by less than one in five of the population: its heartland was overwhelmingly in the western periphery, its core-base, of agricultural smallholders and fishing families, an economically depressed and vulnerable community, experiencing heavy emigration' (27) – a scenario which is a close match for contemporary Taiwan. This is the unpromising situation which the Gaelic League and then the newly formed Irish state inherited and sought to address through the twentieth century. A hundred years ago – indeed, as far back as 150 years ago – Irish was a language on the wane. There are precious few examples globally of the successful resuscitation of a language 'making a comeback'. Suzanne Romaine's essay on 'Irish in the Global Context' is, in my opinion, the keynote address of the volume. Her verdict is that, when viewed in a comparative perspective, what has been achieved with the maintenance and revival of Irish, despite definite shortcomings, is 'hardly failure' (24).

Pádraig Ó Riagáin starts his essay on Irish-language policy with the view that 'there has always been a good deal of confusion about the ultimate objective of Ireland's Irish-language policy' (55), particularly whether it is the 'displacement of English by Irish' or the setting up a 'bilingual state'. He convincingly demonstrates that

from an international perspective, the bilingual policy pursued by the Irish state... contain[s] two key objectives. The first was the maintenance of Irish as the spoken language in the Gaeltacht areas where it was still the community language... [while] elsewhere the objective was the revival of Irish... In this region, the bilingual policy was not, therefore, one designed to meet the needs of an already existing bilingual community, but rather *it sought to create one*. This feature gave a unique character to Irish-language policy. (56)

The state did not, and has not, lived up to its own aspirations, but then, perhaps, it was always a goal too far. Even in the Gaeltacht, the numbers speaking Irish in the home or community or with their peers have diminished to such an extent that the language is no longer being viably *reproduced* outside the educational context. There are some notable achievements, as Breandán Delap notes, in the establishment of Irish-language radio and television, and other authors allude to the propitious utilization by (green?) grassroots groupings of new media forms in a bid to create virtual communities of Irish-language adherents. Some of the failings certainly seem to be iatrogenic in character – the outcome of governmental policies themselves. As Ó Tuathaigh affirms, ‘the state’s revivalist commitment was most aggressive in the education system’ (29). Schooling carried an inordinate weight, and too heavy a load, to be able to ‘compensate for society’ (to use the phrasing of the pedagogical theorist Basil Bernstein). There are interesting and promising developments with the relatively recent growth of Irish-language medium schools (outside the Gaeltacht) giving some propulsion to the *production* of Irish-language speakers (and listeners and TV-viewers) through education. There is still a widespread attitude, tied up with a key sense of identity, that ‘Irish is good for you’, or, rather, that it is good for the next generation to have a taste of it.

The Irish state’s effort over the last century to revive the Irish language through the vehicle of education when viewed in terms of its own aspirational targets – rather than in comparative terms – are (*pace* Romaine) hardly successful. If a Taiwanese-language activist is to find an example of a minority language being revived through educational enforcement (though not through educational enforcement alone) to become both the official language and the language reproduced through the home as well as produced through the school, then he or she might consider the situation closer to home, where, since the late 1940s, the KMT (Nationalist) regime could be regarded as having successfully revived what was then a minority language, and the third language of Taiwan (behind Taiwanese and Japanese), *guoyu* (Mandarin Chinese).

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