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GAELSCOILEANNA

– AN IRISH WAY TO RESTORE THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE

Irish (*Gaeilge*), also known as Irish Gaelic has the status of the national and the first official language of the Republic of Ireland¹. As for many centuries Ireland was occupied by the English and became part of the British empire, Irish is now spoken as the first language by a minority of Irish people². Although it remains a required subject of study in all schools within the Republic³, as John Waters notices in his article 'New Irish may save language', the standard of spoken Irish has declined significantly and represents the most critical stage in the history of the first official language (*Irish Times*, 26.06. 2006) Many people believe that more efforts should be made to preserve, promote and revive the language. As Pat Carey (b.1947-)⁴, Ireland's former Minister for Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs states: „The Irish language is an important part of who we are. It is an important part of where we have come from and where we are going” (official website of Fianna Fáil).

People who introduced the language in Ireland belonged to Celtic tribes that appeared on the island around 600 BC. The tribes that settled in Ireland, *the Gaels*, probably came from the region of the Caspian Sea⁵. They came in waves of invasion⁶ and within a few hundred years occupied the whole territory, so their culture spread across the entire island. The tribes which lived in Ireland during the period known as *Hallstatt*⁷, spoke Gaelic language, which later became one of the most important Celtic languages. It became the predominant language of the Irish people for most of their recorded history. We do not know much about the language that existed in pre-Christian times. It was not written, but accounts of the times and tales were passed down orally by bards and poets. The only examples of ancient written language exist in the *orgham*⁸ inscriptions on more than 300 gravestones scattered all over Ireland. Dating from the 4th to the 8th century, the inscriptions consist almost entirely of personal names (there are 121 in County Kerry, 81 in County Cork and 75 outside Ireland)⁹.

Christianity reached Ireland probably at the end of the 4th century, thanks to trade contacts with Britain. Around 431 there were many Christians on the island, so the Pope, Celestine (d.432) consecrated Palladius (408/431-457/461) as the bishop for the Irish.

¹ It is also an official language of the European Union.

² A larger proportion of the population uses it as their second language.

³ Schools which receive public money.

⁴ Pat Carey expressed his opinion in “Launch of Fianna Fáil’s policy on the Irish Language and the Gaeltacht” on-line.

⁵ Two groups left the area to emigrate in the direction of the British Isles: *The Brythoni*, who established themselves in Britain and *the Gaels*, who came to Ireland and a part of Scotland (Ranelagh, 1994).

⁶ Levin informs about four waves of invasion, O’ Rahilly, an Irish scholar of the Celtic languages also supports the theory of the arrival of Celtic people in successive waves. However, some historians reject the theory and explain cultural changes by contacts with other countries.

⁷ *Hallstatt* period was named after the archeological site in present-day Austria, where a lot of Celtic relics were found. It dates back to the time around 700-500 B.C. During that time Celts discovered steel and started to produce steel weapons and tools (Websteer 2005: 18-19).

⁸ They were lines which were put together in such a way that they formed letters.

⁹ Thurneysen, Rudolf. 1946. *A Grammar of Old English*. Dublin, p. 9-11.

After his death, St. Patrick (c.390-460)¹⁰ continued his mission and managed to bring to Catholic faith the inhabitants of most of the island. Cahill claims that the fact that he understood Irish people contributed to his success. At the beginning he wanted to organize the Church in Ireland in the same way as the Roman Catholic Church was arranged. He divided the country into bishoprics and introduced church hierarchy. However, due to the conditions prevailing in the country, the church went in a different direction and, in the course of time, monastic church developed, with abbeys gradually developing into large educational centres, which attracted scholars and educated people from all over the country. As pagan Celts showed great respect for knowledge, soon the Gaelic learned class¹¹ easily adjusted to the Christian order in a natural way¹².

St. Patrick and his followers succeeded in Ireland because they combined evangelization with local customs and rituals. St. Patrick suggested such an attitude in his *Confession*, so festivities of pagan Celts were adapted by the Irish Christian Church. Important pagan festivals became Christian holidays and places of worship remained in the same place. That is why Irish Saints' hagiographies contain many Celtic motifs and rituals conducted in Christian times are connected with older pagan rituals. Although Latin was used as the language of the church, Irish was spoken by the Christian monks. When they were copying texts they combined letters of Latin alphabet with *ogham*, creating astonishing headlines and initials¹³.

During the fifth century the language transformed into Old Irish, which, dating from the sixth century used the Latin alphabet. Inscriptions in Old Irish can be seen as comments and illustrations, which Irish monks left in the margins of Latin manuscripts.

By the 10th century the language evolved into Middle Irish, which was spoken throughout Ireland. It was the language in which Irish oral literature, Celtic myths and sagas, including the famous *Ulster Cycle*¹⁴, were written. Although written during medieval period they describe pre-Christian times¹⁵.

In the 12th century, Middle Irish began to evolve into Modern Irish. Although during the same century the Anglo-Normans started invading Ireland¹⁶, much time passed before they managed to enforce English law, customs and language. During those years laws supporting English order were passed.

¹⁰ Saint Patrick was a British-born missionary. When he was sixteen he was kidnapped by Irish raiders and spent six years in north Connacht, as a slave. When he escaped, he went to Gaul, where he became a priest. In 432 he was ordained as a bishop and returned to Ireland (Foster, 2001: 9-12).

¹¹ Brehons, bards, historians and druids.

¹² Cahill, Thomas. 1999. *Jak Irlandczycy ocalili cywilizację*. Poznań, p.161-193.

¹³ Elliot, Marianne. 2000. *The Catholics of Ulster: a history*. London, p. 12-17.

¹⁴ *Ulster Cycle* is one of the four great cycles of Irish mythology. The *Cycles* are preserved in manuscripts of the 12th to the 15th centuries but are much older, probably from the 8th century.

¹⁵ Dillon Myles, Chadwick Nora. 1973. *The Celtic Realms*. London, p. 293-333.

¹⁶ In 1155 Pope Adrian IV (c.1100-1159) gave the king of England lordship over Ireland. In 1169 a force of loosely associated Norman knights landed in Ireland. This was at the request of Dermot MacMurrough (*Diarmait Mac Murchada*), the King of Leinster, who sought their help in regaining his kingdom. In 1171 Henry II landed with a much bigger army in Waterford to ensure his control over the preceding Norman force. He took Dublin and accepted the fealty of the Irish kings and bishops, creating the Lordship of Ireland, which formed part of his Empire.

When religion changed in England¹⁷, the Irish, the majority of whom remained Catholic, suffered more persecutions¹⁸. In 1536 using Irish language was prohibited, Irish law system was abolished¹⁹ and there were bans on Gaelic traditions, even trends in fashion. The activity of Irish poets and harpists was also forbidden. As a result, during the time when Ireland was under the British rule, the Irish language began to decline and English was introduced in the controlled areas.

The demise of the Gaelic way of life and the Irish language started in the 17th century and continued for the next two centuries. The gentry of the country was becoming anglicized and in eastern and central Ireland there were regions where there was no Irish spoken. Adoption of English as a second language was helpful in dealing with authorities and that later led to the abandonment of bilingualism.

The 19th century saw another dramatic decrease in the number of speakers of Irish. The introduction of the National School system in 1830s contributed to that. The Irish wanted to have their children educated, but Irish language was banned not only from the classrooms but also playgrounds outside the school.

The years of and after the Great Famine (1845-1852)²⁰, when Ireland lost half of its population, either due to death or emigration, also contributed to the decline of the language. Irish-speaking areas were severely hit during that period and by the end of the British rule, the Irish language was spoken by less than 15% of the population²¹.

At the end of the 19th century members of the Gaelic Revival movement made efforts to encourage the learning and use of Irish. Emphasis was placed on folk traditions and developing journalism and modern literature in order to promote the language and culture of the country. The work of scholars and writers of that period, like William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)²², Lady Gregory (1852-1932)²³, Douglas Hyde (1860-1949)²⁴, Eoin Mac Neill (1867-1945)²⁵ reflected this growing support for cultural nationalism. They introduced Irish folklore, sport and literature, rejecting the British way of life that had become common. Stimulating the national pride for the past, they recognized the role of the national language and desired to create „the Celtic Golden Age“²⁶, by the restoration of Irish in the whole country.

During those times many organizations appeared that helped restore Irish language and advance Irish culture, thus playing a significant role in the nationalist movements. The growing determination to achieve independence was accompanied by

¹⁷ In 1534 king Henry VIII broke with Rome and declared himself the head of the Church of England. Doctrinal changes were introduced during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

¹⁸ Anti-Catholic *Penal Laws*, which were passed in the 17th century concerned inheritance, legal right to possess and use weapon, the right to vote during elections.

¹⁹ In 1603 *Brehon Laws* (civil codes describing regulations concerning property, inheritance, punishment) were utterly abolished by Parliament and English law system, with jury courts and common law, was introduced (Foster, 1989: 244).

²⁰ The famine occurred in Ireland in the years 1845-49, when potato crops failed in successive years.

²¹ Price, Glanville. 2000. *Languages in Britain*. Wiley-Blackwell, p. 10

²² W.B. Yeats was an Irish poet and playwright, the co-founder of the Abbey Theatre. Yeats was one of the foremost figures of 20th century literature. In 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

²³ Isabella Augusta Gregory was an Irish dramatist and folklorist, co-founder of the Irish Literary Theatre and the Abbey Theatre.

²⁴ Douglas Hyde was a scholar of the Irish language and one of the founders of the Gaelic League, one of the most influential organizations in Ireland at the time.

²⁵ Eoin MacNeill was an Irish scholar (he is regarded as the father of the modern study of early Irish medieval history), nationalist, revolutionary and politician. He was the co-founder of the Gaelic League.

²⁶ The early Christian and pre-Christian times were described as the Celtic Golden Age.

the conviction that „new Ireland would be not only free but Gaelic as well”²⁷. One of the organizations, the Gaelic League, since its foundation in 1893, demanded the recognition of the Irish language. They aimed both at the preservation of Irish as the national language and the extension of its use as spoken language, so they got engaged in a wide educational programme outside the school system. They organized language classes, summer courses for teachers, cultural events and put pressure on the state to introduce bilingual programmes in Irish schools. By 1904 the League attracted around 50 000 members. Thanks to their activities the position of the Irish language changed. In 1904 the use of Irish as a medium of instruction was permitted in *Gaeltacht*²⁸ schools and by 1915-16 roughly half of the schools of Irish-speaking districts (as defined in 1926) were using Irish as a medium of instruction²⁹.

In 1922, when the Irish Free State was formed, the Irish language, being an integral part of Irish identity, was to play the central role in the emergence and shaping of the new state. It was hoped that people who do not know Irish would learn to be proud of it and would be willing to learn it.

However, the new authorities were not successful in restoring the language. Irish is still spoken by a small minority of the Irish population, mostly in *Gaeltacht* areas, where Irish language is spoken at home. Such areas are in County Galway, on the west coast of County Donegal, in Kerry and Cork. Smaller ones also exist in Mayo, Meath, Waterford³⁰. These districts were first officially recognised during the early years of the Irish Free State, as part of the government policy to restore the Irish language³¹.

Outside the traditionally Irish speaking regions there have been demands from the local communities, especially in urban areas, for Irish-medium education. There was considerable public support for the expectation that the „Gaelicisation” of Ireland would be achieved through its education system. Three groups of people formed the core of the *Gaelscoil* movement. The first one comprised Irish speaking aristocracy, many of whom traced their roots back to the revolutionary movements of the beginnings of the 20th century. Those people were linked to the language revival movements and were in the civil service, law, the arts and education. They constituted a small, highly educated cultural elite which emerged after the foundation of the State. Another group were the *Gaeltacht* people who moved to Dublin. The last group included people involved in the fight for independent Ireland. Although the demand for *Gaelscoileanna* broke out of this relatively narrow group, it soon extended into the mainstream middle class³².

In 1920s the government decided to promote the Irish language in three ways: through the state system, the educational system and by conserving the Irish-speaking areas – *Gaeltacht*. Two languages became official languages – Irish and English. It

²⁷ Hyland Aine, Milne Kenneth. 1992. *Irish Education*. Dublin, p. 86.

²⁸ *Gaeltacht*, is the Irish Gaelic word meaning an Irish speaking region. In Ireland the *Gaeltacht*, or *An Ghaeltacht* refers to all districts where the government recognizes that the Irish language is the predominant language.

²⁹ Hindley Reg. 1990. *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary*. London, p.11-24.

³⁰ There are 20 *Gaeltacht* towns and villages in County Donegal, 15 in County Galway, 7 in County Kerry, 6 in Cork.

³¹ In 1926 the law was passed and *Gaeltacht* areas came officially into being.

³² Ó' Murchú, Helen. 2001. *The Irish Language in Education in the Republic of Ireland*. Mercator-Education, p. 10-12.

was decided that all official documents were to be published in both languages³³. The government required a degree of proficiency in Irish for all people newly appointed to civil service positions³⁴. There was also a requirement to pass the Irish language in order to receive a secondary school certificate³⁵.

Since the foundation of the Free State, the keystone of the language revival policy of the successive governments was the requirement that subjects in the national schools should be taught through the medium of Irish. In 1922 the Congress of the Irish Teachers Organization decided to convene a representative conference to „frame a programme or series of programmes, in accordance with Irish ideals and conditions”³⁶. The same year a radical curriculum reform was introduced, based on the recommendation of the Programme Conference. It related to the primary school programme and the training of teachers. The teaching of Irish language was introduced in all national schools. Irish was either to be taught as a school subject or used as a medium of instruction.

One of the leading characteristics of the Programme was the insistence on the principle of teaching the infant classes through the medium of Irish. The authors were convinced that it would be sufficient (given fluent and trained teachers) to impart to children a vernacular power over the language. With older children, Irish was suggested as the medium of instruction only if teachers were qualified to do that efficiently. Nevertheless, the Department of Education wrote a letter to every school, instructing school managements to introduce teaching as many subjects as possible through the medium of Irish.

The difficulties of implementing the First National Programme became apparent the same year, in the school year 1922/23. The main problem was that only about 1 000 out of the 12 000 teachers at the time had bilingual certificates and their proficiency in Irish was such that they could teach the new programme competently. In a large number of schools teaching entirely through the medium of Irish was not feasible, as not many teachers had sufficient facility in the language. To improve the situation many in-service courses were provided for teachers who could also spend time in *Gaeltacht* areas to learn Irish. At the same time, in the years 1922-24 preparatory colleges were established for those who were interested in training as primary school teachers. As Irish was the language of these colleges, they were supposed to ensure a supply of teachers who would be able to teach through Irish. Courses in Irish helped a number of teachers to develop their Irish language skills it but was obvious that time was needed to fully implement the new National Programme.³⁷

Additionally, with the introduction of the first National Programme the approach to education changed. The child-centred approach had been rejected as the development of the child took second place to the revival of the language. It was particularly visible in infant classes, where the work had to be done entirely through Irish. As the primary school curriculum focused primarily on the teaching of Irish, subjects that were not considered important (like physical education or drawing) were

³³ Now documents must be published in both official languages or Irish alone- according to the *Official Languages Act* of 2003.

³⁴ For example postal workers, tax officials.

³⁵ The First Official Language requirement was dropped in 1973. In 1974 proficiency in one official language was introduced.

³⁶ Hyland Aine, Milne Kenneth. 1992. *Irish Education*. Dublin, p. 86.

³⁷ Hyland Aine, Milne Kenneth. 1992. *Irish Education*. Dublin, p. 40-98.

taken out of the curriculum. Such an attitude was criticized by both parents and teachers and soon resulted in calls for reform in the curriculum.

As a result the government set up a committee to review the curriculum. In 1941 the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the use of Irish as the Teaching Medium was published. It revealed that the majority of teachers believed that teaching through Irish inhibited the child intellectually. In 1948, when the results of the 1947 report were published, the Minister for Education issued a revised programme for infant classes, allowing teachers to use their students' home language for half an hour daily. As Hyland informs, in 1959 the Minister for Education³⁸ was asked whether he was satisfied that teaching all subjects through Irish was educationally sound and if he believed it to be the best way to advance the use of Irish. He admitted that examining the matter he realised that concentrating on teaching Irish well rather than teaching through Irish would achieve more³⁹.

In 1960 schools were informed to transfer the emphasis from teaching through Irish to the teaching of Irish conversation if they felt that pupils were more likely to make progress from this approach. That was the first step in the dismantling of the policy of teaching through Irish.

During those years it started to be obvious that the Irish language would not be easily restored as the spoken language. In spite of the government policy it was not revived to the extent aspired to by the leaders of the Free State. The proportion of the population who could speak Irish was not growing and many people stopped supporting the idea of *Gaelscoileanna*. In subsequent years the number of schools in which all subjects were taught through Irish decreased dramatically and the decline of the number of those schools caused the erosion of the language.

In 1960s free education at secondary level was introduced. As some educationalists argued that teaching through Irish was unfair for less academic children, parents pressed to have teaching through English, so all secondary schools became English-language institutions. During that time preparatory colleges were closed and English became the only language of the teacher training colleges. As a result, there were fewer teachers qualified to teach through Irish.

In the early 1970s there were only 16 Irish-medium schools outside *Gaeltacht* areas (11 primary and 5 post-primary), out of a hundred ten years earlier. With the demise of Irish-medium education an organization was created to support the schools which still existed and help establish new ones. Two different groups came together, a group of teachers in Galway and a group of parents and teachers in Dublin, whose aim was to strengthen the Irish speaking community and culture. In 1973 they established an organization *Comhchiste Náisiúnta na Scoileanna Gaeilge* or *Gaelscoileanna Teo*, as it is called now. It decided to support schools, work on documents on Irish language policy and publish them, collect and publish statistics and organize courses for teachers. The organization started to help in establishing *Gaelscoileanna* schools and provided assistance and support to parents and communities that wished to found a school.

³⁸ Dr Patrick Hillery (1923-2008) was the Minister for Education in the years 1959-1965.

³⁹ Hyland Aine, Milne Kenneth. 1992. *Irish Education*. Dublin, p. 115-131.

New *Gaelscoileanna* are usually opened with funds raised in the community⁴⁰. Fund raising is organized by different Irish language organizations. *Gaelscoileanna* work under the patronage of Church authorities or voluntary organizations, often An Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge⁴¹ which was set up for the purpose of Irish language schools.

The method of teaching, known as „language immersion” is applied in *Gaelscoileanna*. In the method the target language is used as the means of instruction. Students study the standard curriculum, acquiring the Irish language through language immersion. In the early years of education, teachers, realising that students do not understand everything they say, use body language and visual aids to help them. It is common for students to speak a mixture of English and Irish while talking to other students or responding to their teacher. As they get older they become better at Irish and naturally begin to use only Irish. This way of teaching proved to be the most effective and showed that new *Gaelscoileanna* produce competent Irish speakers.

At the beginning parents were fearful that Irish language education may have negative impact on children’s English language development. However, research conducted in the years 1972-2001 showed clearly that immersion education may enhance not only English language development but also other languages and subjects, for example maths. Education Research Institute assessed the level of achievement and it was confirmed the standard of English and mathematics in Irish-medium schools is well above the national average⁴². It proves the benefits of bilingual approach to learning.

Although it is an advantage if Irish is spoken at home, it is not necessary for parents to speak Irish if they want to send their children to Irish-language schools. However, parents who wish to improve their language skills are also provided with a lot of support.

The first Irish-medium schools were primary schools but in recent years more and more Irish speaking secondary schools have opened and soon acquired reputation for providing excellent academic results. They give better average access to tertiary education and the employment opportunities (22% - Irish medium school, 7% English medium school).

Looking at the statistics we can see that thanks to the new approach to Irish-medium schools, for the last thirty years *Gaelscoileanna* have been the fastest growing sector of education. In 1972 there were eleven primary and five post-primary schools with Irish as the language of instruction. Now there are 173 primary and 40 post-primary schools, with about 40 000 children⁴³ receiving education in Irish medium schools. Now there is at least one *Gaelscoil* providing primary education in each of 32 counties of Ireland and several in larger towns and cities. There are only nine counties that do not have a secondary level of Irish language school⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ Majority of schools in Ireland are privately owned and supported by different churches and organizations. The state pays for the upkeep of the building and running costs and local contribution is made towards the running costs.

⁴¹ The organization was founded in 1993 to act as a patron body for *Gaelscoileanna*

⁴² Hayes C. 2010. „Irish language schools outperform English schools in Ireland”, *Irish Central*, 4 June 2010, p. 8.

⁴³ 32 551 pupils in primary schools and 2 827 in post-primary schools (statistics gathered by *Gaelscoileanna* Teo, presented during the conference in Tullamore, on the 25-th and 26th November 2011)

⁴⁴ Cumming, Denis. 2008. „Ireland’s ‘Gaelscoileanna’ creating educational divide”, November 3, 2008.

The schools get support of urban professional class and are generally found in middle class suburbs. Sometimes (rarely) they exist in disadvantaged areas and then, they cater for middle class children from elsewhere.

Parents who have decided to send their children to *Gaelscoileanna* explain their decision in many ways. Some (a minority) use Irish as their first language, so they want their children to get Irish-medium education. Others attended *Gaelscoileanna* themselves and are interested in the advantage of making their children bilingual. Although Irish has been a compulsory school subject for a long time, many people believe that their command of spoken Irish is inadequate, therefore, they want their children to be able to speak their national language. For many, the main reason is simply good educational reputation of such schools.

The Irish people are unanimous in their attitude to the promotion of the Irish language. The proponents of *Gaelscoileanna* stress that those schools honour the history and culture of Ireland and encourage the Irish to take pride in their heritage. Critics say that they are better funded than other schools and more elite. As more students continue at the 3rd level of education than after English medium schools, there is a lot of competition for places in a *Gaelscoil*, which, according to critics, gives the children of wealthy parents advantage of being accepted. On the other hand, parents sending their children to such schools reject the idea that they are better funded and have a privileged position. They say that no new *Gaelscoileanna* have been given state funding since 2008 and they survive on fund raising organized by Irish language organizations. The fact that more graduates of Irish speaking, free secondary schools enrol at universities than fee-paying schools' learners do, shows that there is something in *Gaelscoileanna*, which money cannot buy. Parents' involvement seems to be the answer. They are not passive spectators, but participate in the work of the school. They are consulted in many matters, they feel ownership and that drives them to *Gaelscoileanna*.

Those schools have few immigrant or special need students (according to 2008 audit by the Department of Education and Science), so some people accuse *Gaelscoileanna* of discriminating immigrant population. All *Gaelscoileanna* inform that they are open to all, but immigrants tend to seek English-language schools. In recent years some schools have established minimums for foreign-born students⁴⁵. In spite of that not many immigrants decide to attend those schools. Those who choose *Gaelscoileanna* believe that exposure to the Irish language helps them better adjust to the Irish society.

People willing to keep their Irish heritage and aware of its importance have been putting pressure on the government to spread the use of their national language. As a result, in November 2009 „20 Year Language Strategy” was published. It stresses the importance of offering all children in primary schools an opportunity to experience partial immersion in the formative years of primary school. Teachers are advised to have additional classes to improve competence in Irish. This might help in introducing teaching some subjects (such as science or mathematics) in Irish.

In 2011 The Department of Education and Skills announced that there are plans of opening new *Gaelscoileanna*: 14 new post-primary schools are to open by 2014. This decision lets us hope that long-lasting efforts of many Irish patriots will not be

⁴⁵ Gaelscoil in Ennis has 5% minimum and had admission of 10% of foreign-born students.

wasted and the Irish language will never disappear for the benefit of all Irish people, their sense of identity and national pride.

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie działań na rzecz zachowania języka irlandzkiego (iryjskiego) z jednoczesnym ujęciem rysu historycznego. W pierwszej części autorka w sposób szczegółowy przedstawia historię powstania, rozwój oraz ewolucję języka irlandzkiego na przestrzeni dziejów. W konsekwencji przechodzi do określenia działań mających na celu utrzymanie i rozwój języka irlandzkiego. Bardzo szeroko przedstawia rolę edukacji oraz instrumenty użyte do ocalenia języka, takie jak: ewolucja programu nauczania, metody nauczania, rozpowszechnianie oraz promocja języka na rzecz podtrzymania tożsamości narodowej i kulturowej.

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