OUR OWN LANGUAGE

An Irish Initiative

Gabrielle Maguire

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS
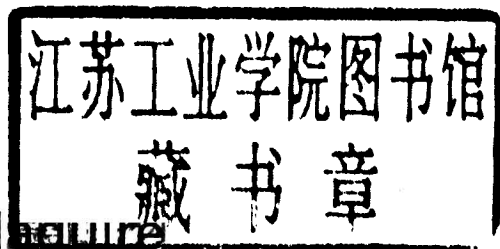
Our Own Language: An Irish Initiative

Gabrielle Maguire

do
Phádraig ó Brannduibh,
cara dílís

Contents

Final comments on the significance of this Community's
achievement from a variety of perspectives. Suggestions are made
for further supportive initiatives.

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Introduction

General Orientation

This book tells the story of a bilingual community in Belfast. It had its origin in a PhD thesis which was commenced in 1982 and completed in the autumn of 1986, at the Queen's University of Belfast. The subject of the study was a community of eleven families who, during the 1960s, determined to raise their children through Irish in a favourable, supportive environment. At a first glance, this goal may seem reasonable and unremarkable. It can be better appreciated in light of the fact that none of these couples were native speakers of Irish. Rather, they had all taken steps to become competent speakers as young adults.

Indeed, any project aimed at rebuilding the status and functional value of what is perceived as 'our own language' could be further appreciated within a broader context. Within a global framework, where multinational industries postulate uniformity, peoples who protest the authenticity of their cultural identity become an endangered species. Mass media and mass marketing share a common interest in moulding a culturally homogeneous target population, embracing as wide a territory as possible. Under the impact of these commercial forces ordinary peoples become submerged in value systems which do not take cognisance of distinctive identities. The object of reaching a wide target population which has been trained to respond to these commercial forces makes financial sense. However, cultural diversity can only hope to hover on the periphery of this type of model. Accordingly, the preservation of cultural distinctiveness becomes an uphill struggle, posing an awesome challenge.

This book tells of a community in Belfast which accepted the challenge. These people resolved not only to learn Irish but to become active, competent bilinguals and to rear their children as confident Irish speakers whose view of the world would be perceived from their own culturally unique perspective. Furthermore, they set about generating a wider awareness, in surrounding neighbourhoods, of the relevance of the Irish language in today's urban scene. In addition to the vast economic pressures which discourage such a venture, the reality of pursuing these goals lacked the advantage of a favourable social, historical and political framework.

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Irish enjoys no official status in the six north eastern counties of Ireland and the promotion of the language has depended largely on the work of independent cultural groups and organisations. Until the early part of the twentieth century Irish survived as a native language in four of those six counties — Tyrone, Antrim, Armagh and Derry. Indeed, in parts of Tyrone, native speakers could still be found in the 1950s. However, any opportunity for being raised in an Irish-speaking (or bilingual) environment in Northern Ireland was eradicated as these Irish-speaking pockets disappeared. The young couples who determined to restore some of its former vigour to the language, by acquiring it and developing it as the family and community language, realised that this could not be achieved satisfactorily if they were dispersed throughout Belfast. They had to establish an Irish-speaking nucleus wherein social interaction could be carried out through Irish.

Participants in the enterprise set about securing a site and building their houses, with a view to constructing an Irish-speaking urban enclave wherein the Community children could find it 'natural' to communicate through Irish. Their acquisition of English was ensured by exposure to the media and by interaction with non-Irish speakers from outside the Community. The conditions wherein Irish could be used had to be created and nurtured.

Community members were motivated by the recognition that the creation of a socially cohesive speech community was necessary if they were to have any chance of bringing up Irish-speaking families in Belfast. This project proved successful. Not only did the Community of eleven families survive the pressures of being rooted in an English-speaking society. In addition, it exerted a significant impact upon the surrounding neighbourhoods, contributing to a wider shift towards bilingualism. Furthermore, the Shaw's Road Community inspired other community enterprises throughout the North, particularly in the area of Irish-medium education.

Linguists have written prolifically about the various types and degrees of bilingualism which exist throughout the world. Definitions of bilingualism have ranged from a 'nativelike' command of two languages (Bloomfield, 1933), or an 'equal proficiency in two languages' (Rayfield, 1970: 11) to a much more relaxed, minimal acquaintance with the less dominant language (Haugen, 1956; Macnamara, 1967: 59–77). In the present book, the focus is directed at the emergence of bilingualism in West Belfast. However, an evaluation of the nature and degree of language dominance has not been a primary objective in this work. Rather, a broader approach was considered more meaningful and, indeed, necessary in this particular study.

Over the past few decades, it has become widely recognised that a study of language involves more than an evaluation of linguistic data. This is evident

from the development of a multi-disciplinary approach to language, particularly within the areas of education, sociology and psychology. In a bilingual situation, where a minority language is being reinvigorated in certain districts within the community, the study must encompass a variety of other pertinent issues. In such a situation, a linguistic examination cannot be fully understood unless the author provides some insights into other issues, such as the self-respect of individuals as part of a community and nation. Such insights help to bridge the gap between analysis and full understanding. Without wishing to overstate the point, a scientific analysis of linguistic phenomena will have a limited relevance if the researcher doesn't reach the spirit of the speech community. One example of a work which strikes the balance to considerable effect is Dorian's investigation of East Sutherland Gaelic in decline, in *Language Death* (1981).

The aim of this present book is to examine a unique bilingual situation in Belfast from a sociolinguistic perspective. However, it also records a story of remarkable achievement which will hopefully inspire any group of people interested in reintroducing or strengthening a minority language in a satisfying and functional way. It is hoped that a fairly comprehensive picture is given, portraying this Community's role in the diffusion of Irish as an effective means of communication in urban life. The linguistic profile of the Irish itself commanded primary attention during the years of research. A fuller and more detailed account is given in the thesis than could be presented here. However, the overall trends described here should be of as much interest to readers who are unfamiliar with Irish as to fluent speakers.

When the research for this work was initiated, the Irish-speaking Community at Shaw's Road was thriving quietly. Visitors came and went — mainly people interested in minority languages. However, local media had not yet paid any serious attention to the Community. The Irish-medium primary school (Bunscoil), founded and managed by Community parents, had expanded and begun to attract growing numbers of children from outside the Shaw's Road vicinity. As pressure on the Government persisted and increased, aimed at securing official recognition and support for the school, the national media became alerted to the emergence of a new sociolinguistic phenomenon in their midst. Incongruities in the treatment of Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and Irish attracted more overt criticism as the public eye focused on the growth of this Community's school in West Belfast.

The thesis and subsequent book were prepared during an exciting period, both for the Shaw's Road Community and for Irish generally. The campaign for official support was drawing to a climax when research was just under way. During the first two years, the primary school was being funded largely by the organised activities of parents. Other parents had spent periods teaching in the

school or providing educational materials for the children. A dramatic change followed the announcement by the Minister of Education that the Bunscoil was to be recognised as a Voluntary Maintained School, entitled to official financial backing. Pupil numbers continued to swell. More Irish-medium nursery schools sprang up in various community centres throughout the city, while similar developments were occurring elsewhere in the North. Indeed, the latest problem to be tackled by Belfast's Irish speakers has been how to overcome the need to restrict pupil intake into the Shaw's Road school and still respond to the mounting demand by parents for Irish-medium education. A second Irish-medium primary school was opened in the area in 1987, with the process of campaigning for official support initiated once more. Progress in the area of Irish-medium education was not paralleled in other schools where Irish is taught as a subject. Curriculum changes designed for secondary schools threatened to reduce the status of Irish at that level (DENI, 1988). The response from Irish-language teachers and other Irish speakers was vehemently opposed to official proposals. Later, certain concessions and modifications were made by the Minister.

Outside the realm of education further advances were made which suggest a more enlightened attitude towards the Irish language. For example, the total absence of official data on the position of Irish in the North has been, to some extent, corrected. The contribution of the Shaw's Road Community upon these developments is significant. In some ways, this influence has a direct bearing. Fundamentally, the fact of the Community's existence and survival have sufficed as a source of encouragement and motivation for other cultural and language-related projects.

In telling the story of the Shaw's Road Community in Belfast, it is vital to look beyond that core of eleven families to the families from surrounding neighbourhoods whose children attend the Bunscoil. These parents were given the opportunity to introduce their families to some degree of bilingualism by sending their children to the Bunscoil. All of the parents make some effort to acquire Irish in order to support their children. Accordingly, not only do children from predominantly English-speaking homes become competent, active bilinguals but, to varying degrees, the Irish language penetrates the home. This extended network of families is referred to, throughout the book, as the 'Bunscoil families'.

Content

The Shaw's Road Community was planned throughout the 1960s and the first couples took up residence towards the end of that decade. The emergence of this Irish-speaking community in Belfast was a pioneering initiative in many respects. However, it represents an important development in the history of the

Irish language — a development which grew out of a long series of preceding events. This development was an almost inevitable reaction to a peculiar inter-action of social, political and educational circumstances within Northern Ireland's historic make-up. Yet, also within this contextual account of the Community's emergence, it becomes clear that the strengths and commitment of certain individuals have great significance and relevance. This background is discussed in chapters 1–5. Therein, some insights are provided into the historical context which resulted in some young Belfast couples taking the initiative to cater for their own linguistic needs. This is followed by an outline of the current position of Irish in Belfast and the account of how the Shaw's Road Community came into existence.

Chapters 6–10 deal with the process of language diffusion which is inspired by the Bunscoil. The nature of the Shaw's Road Community's impact on neigh-bouring districts becomes evident. As access to the language via the Bunscoil is availed of, the wider shift towards bilingualism gains momentum and the pat-terns of language behaviour which evolve are moulded by a complex of social and psychological factors. Language shift is defined by Fasold (1984: 213) in the following terms:

> Language **shift** simply means that a community gives up a language com-pletely in favor of another one. The members of the community, when the shift has taken place, have collectively chosen a new language where an old one used to be.

Within the context of this book, however, language shift may represent a more intermediate stage in the changing patterns of language behaviour in a commu-nity. In some domains the shift is, indeed, complete. However, the overall shift referred to among the wider community of learners is just as significant even though it is at an incipient stage.

At the outset of this work, the children of Bunscoil families were still very young and were predominantly in the junior classes. Accordingly, their com-mand of Irish was still much more receptive than active. For this reason, the Irish spoken by these children was not included in the linguistic analysis of this particular study. Rather, it was more appropriate to base the linguistic descrip-tion on the children who resided in the Shaw's Road Community itself. Chapters 11 and 12 present these findings.

Methodology

The methodology for these two aspects of the research was, naturally, very different. It was not possible to give more than an outline of some of the ways

in which the Shaw's Road Community galvanised a wider active interest in Irish. Individual members of the Community have initiated or assisted many other language-related projects. However, it is undoubtedly the Community's primary school which most effectively opened the door to the acquisition of Irish in surrounding neighbourhoods. In order to examine the nature of the bilingualism evolving as pupil intake at the Bunscoil increases, a sociolinguistic survey was designed and administered to the full population of Bunscoil parents. This involved interviewing 98 families in the spring of 1985.

A postal survey was not considered satisfactory for this work. In order to note any additional relevant information about the families' experiences which did not fall into the categories of questionnaire responses, it was necessary to personally interview each of the families from outside the Shaw's Road Community who had a child at the school. As it transpired, many of the parents made further comments about their children's language behaviour after the questionnaire was completed. These were noted and added to the overall picture of the bilingualisation process. The pilot study indicated the usefulness of having two versions of the questionnaire so that the parents' answers would not be prejudiced by lists of possible responses. The parents were given one copy so that they could read the questions independently. This allowed parents to consider their responses and to elaborate upon them if they desired. Responses were recorded by myself on the second copy of the questionnaire. A relaxed atmosphere prevailed during the survey administration once the initial introductions were made. Most of the answers and comments given were quite detailed. Various categories of questions were built into the survey, investigating the patterns of bilingualism emerging among Bunscoil families and the role of the Bunscoil in this development.

The linguistic analysis of the Irish spoken in the Shaw's Road Community also necessitated numerous interviews with the children, as one dimension to the work carried out with them. It was important to spend as much time as possible in the company of the children and to build up a sound rapport with them, so that their Irish could be studied in a natural environment. A formal linguistic analysis of parents' Irish was not carried out. Shaw's Road parents had learned Irish as a second language; their children, on the other hand, were being raised with Irish as their first language. Obviously, parents influence the Irish spoken by their children. However, interest in the parents' Irish was motivated only by that relationship, rather than for its own sake. The Shaw's Road children belong to a particularly significant phase in the Language Revival in Northern Ireland. Within this context, they are the first generation to be raised and educated through Irish. A record of their language behaviour in this particular urban bilingual setting, as well as their attitudes towards the role of Irish in their lives, merits attention in any future

framework of language planning. Subsequent revival endeavours could learn much from these children.

Although Irish is the children's first language, they are subject to heavy pressures from the English-speaking world around them. It is not surprising, therefore, that the linguistic trends which characterise the children's Irish are fairly typical of those occurring in the Irish of Bunscoil children who come from English-speaking backgrounds and, indeed, in the Irish of the wider population of second language learners. The advantages enjoyed by the Shaw's Road children are more clearly manifested in their fluency and confidence as Irish speakers.

Linguistic data were accumulated over a period of four years, while the thesis was being prepared. Recording sessions ceased in 1986, although contact with the children has been maintained on a regular basis since and linguistic developments have been observed. Twenty-two of the Community children participated in the main corpus of recording sessions. These participants were aged between eight and eighteen at the outset. During the period of fieldwork, and since then, I spent a considerable amount of time in the children's company, through participation in a variety of activities. Material noted on these occasions supplemented recorded data.

It is important to state, at this point, that this analysis was based on the casual, everyday linguistic output produced by the children. Some samples of written material were gathered and examined and a few recordings of the children reading pieces of text were made. In addition, my interaction with the children meant that I was in their presence on formal as well as on informal occasions. Accordingly, some references are made in the book to stylistic variations in their linguistic output. However, it should be borne in mind that the account given in chapter 12 is based predominantly upon the relaxed and natural conversational style of speech rather than a more careful, consciously monitored style.

In view of this emphasis upon casual speech, it was imperative to arrange recording sessions in a suitably relaxed environment. Several settings were used. An available room in some of the children's homes was used on a few occasions. However, this was not the most appropriate setting. Rather, in the parents' absence, the young 'hosts' took the opportunity to create a party-type atmosphere which made recordings a little difficult. The most successful setting for recordings was the Irish nursery school, situated behind the children's homes. At that time, the Bunscoil and affiliated nursery were still quite small and used for a multitude of activities. The setting was not very formal. However, some light refreshments and the friendly chatter of the children themselves reduced the formalities even further. Some recording sessions were made in other settings, for

example in Donegal where the eleven-year-olds spent a fortnight, once the Transfer Examination (11+) had been done in their final Bunscoil year.

Individual differences in the Irish spoken by the children were, of course, observed and noted. However, they were not so distinctive as to merit a presentation of data in relation to particular individuals. For example, recording sessions tended to be carried out with particular peer groups and, indeed, different groups showed some distinguishing characteristics. However, these were much less numerous and significant than might have been expected. Obviously, the language skills of older groups were more highly developed. Overall trends, however, were relatively uniform.

One factor which did exert some influence upon the children's language behaviour and repertoire of Irish was the transfer to English-medium secondary schools. Although this move coincided with reaching a particular age, it was the sudden exposure to a more concentrated English-speaking environment which triggered certain changes.

Overall Aim

It is hoped that the contents of this book will be meaningful to anyone interested in language revival. The overall aim runs parallel to the objectives of the Shaw's Road Community itself. The founder members of the Community set out to prove that their language was accessible and of practical relevance in the modern urban setting. Having closely examined multiple aspects of this sociolinguistic phenomenon it becomes clear that this story can inspire not only the population of West Belfast but also other language groups throughout the world.

When the core members of the Community decided upon this project they did not consider failure. Those who did stepped back in those early days. The resolution to realise the ambition of creating a cohesive Irish-speaking neighbourhood was in itself remarkable. So many factors militated against it. Yet, this turned out to be but a first stage in a broader development which embraced the wider population of Northern Ireland. The Shaw's Road Community made other people take Irish seriously. It continues to fulfil that function. This book examines that function and its implications for the Irish language in Northern Ireland.

1 A Language Initiative in West Belfast

Shaw's Road lies on the periphery of one of the large working class housing estates in West Belfast. Until recent years, the unique character of the community residing on Shaw's Road attracted little attention. Only local residents and a few Irish language enthusiasts were alerted to the emergence of an interesting and exciting development in the Language Revival Movement.

Today, the name 'Shaw's Road' represents more than just another street name in Belfast. It has become a living symbol of the improving fortunes of the Irish language and an encouraging landmark along the route to its revival. For anyone who loves that language this symbol evokes an emotive response. It is laden with a strong conviction of the feasibility of reclaiming and reinvigorating a neglected cultural patrimony. It also evokes the living experience of using the Irish language as a functional tool within a modern urban context. Just as Lower Abbey Street, in Dublin, is forever linked with the establishment of the Abbey Theatre and the Anglo-Irish literary revival, so is Shaw's Road indissolubly linked with the re-establishment of Irish as a normal means of communication in a place where it has not had this role for centuries.

To the casual onlooker, the appearance of this site in West Belfast yields no clue as to its significance. A group of eleven houses is situated directly opposite a public authority housing estate. The houses stand in an L-shaped formation around a primary school. Further housing development is in progress immediately behind the school. However, the expanding population is not the significant factor. The true importance of the place is apparent to the ear, rather than to the eye. As small children enter the school gates, or as one of the community residents calls out to the family pet, a stranger would be startled to recognise Irish as the language being used. In fact, this core of eleven houses is referred to locally as the 'Irish-speaking houses'. Behind them stands the 'Irish-speaking school', or Bunscoil Phobal Feirste.

Families rearing their children through Irish are not unknown in Belfast. However, a whole community whose creation and existence successfully share

the common purpose of raising and educating children through Irish is unprecedented in twentieth-century urban Ireland. Indeed history shows the process of urbanisation to be among those forces which have weakened the general usage of the language, at least since post-Norman times. Belfast, therefore, might appear at first glance to represent an unlikely and unpromising ground for the cultivation of the Irish language. Even within the city itself many people cannot fathom the question: how could Belfast have been made to accommodate the emergence and obstinate survival of a community of Irish-speaking families? After all, for centuries the odds have been weighted heavily against the continued use of Irish, not only throughout Ireland but particularly within the six north-eastern counties and most especially in Belfast.

The Odds Against a Revival

Official attitudes

Belfast's pre-eminence as a city of community divisions was crystallised by the division of the country following the Government Of Ireland Act, 1920. Partition, and the establishment of the Stormont Government in Belfast, tended to undermine the cultural heritage of the minority population living within these new boundaries. Belfast became the official guardian of colonial interests and, by this stage, the English language had taken up a position of total dominance leaving the indigenous language in a position of low status. However, a sense of sociopolitical stability and security, which could foster confidence in the solidity of political integration with Britain, had never been achieved. Therefore, the Irish language and culture were regarded with suspicion as a threat to the established political framework and as running counter to majority interests. The problem of facilitating the cultural needs of the minority Catholic population was resolved with expedience by proclaiming the non-existence of any such needs.

In this way, both the refusal to recognise and the neglect to make provisions for the cultural values of the minority sector were construed as a judicious and rational relegation of obsolete relics, such as the Irish language, into the confines of history books. The possibility that Irish deserved attention as a living modern language was consistently denied. In the 1930s, Viscount Craigavon, who was to become Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, expounded this official view of the language in response to a parliamentary question raised regarding the removal of a grant for Irish.

> What use is it to us here in this busy part of the Empire to teach our children the Irish language? What use would it be to them? Is it not leading them along a road which has no practical value? We have not stopped such teaching; we have stopped the grants, which I think amounted to £1,500 a year. We have stopped the grants simply because we do not see that these boys being taught Irish would be any better citizens ... I hope the honorable member is satisfied that, on the whole, the Government is carrying out its duties fairly and justly among all sections of the population. (N.I. Parliamentary Debates, Commons, vol. XVIII c. 646, 24th March 1936.)

Such a pattern of neglect can often be more effective, in extinguishing a minority language, than an explicitly hostile policy. The absence of favourable provisions for the development of indigenous cultural manifestations is less likely to provoke a hostile response than is the presence of overt antagonism.

A further example of the official rejection of the language's value or validity was demonstrated in October 1949, by another future Prime Minister, Mr Brian Faulkner:

> Apparently certain local authorities in County Down are at the moment naming streets in a language which is not our language and I do not think that should be allowed (N.I. Parliamentary Debates, Commons, vol. XXXIII, c.1546–1547).

The MP went on to request that the prohibition of Irish street names be enshrined in the Public Health And Local Government Act. The motion was opposed by a Nationalist MP, Mr Healy, who outlined some of the educational and cultural advantages of preserving local forms of placenames. His statement ended with an allusion to the crucial question of identity: 'You want British names which have no connection with Ulster. Ulster is part of Ireland.' The concluding response (from Dame Dehra Parker, minister of Health and Local Government) declared that Ulster was part of the United Kingdom. The complex interrelationship between the Irish language and the Nationalist identity which attracted Unionist suspicion was left unresolved and the requested amendment to the Act was passed, rendering the erection of street names in Irish illegal.

Northern Ireland's broadcasting authorities further endorsed the Government's treatment of Irish as a language without relevance. Planners in the areas of television, radio and newspapers swelled the numbers of powerful public and private sector administrators who were antipathetic to or, at best, indifferent to the Irish language.

Even within the domain of the Roman Catholic Church, facilities for Irish speakers or for members sympathetic to the language were not forthcoming.