

A Contrastive View of Irish Language Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of the linguistic anthropology which underpins the language dynamics of two Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) areas, Ros Muc in Conamara, Co. Galway and Ráth Cairn in Co. Meath. This research highlights what could be considered a socio-linguistic paradox: the community (Ráth Cairn) which engages more vigorously in language maintenance endeavors, and exhibits a greater awareness of language policy and of linguistic ideology among members of the community, fares less favorably in socio-linguistic terms to the contrasting community (Ros Muc) which has to endure a more challenging socio-economic climate than that of Ráth Cairn. The relative socio-economic success of the Ráth Cairn community appears to be masking a greater malaise of socio-cultural fragility and language endangerment. In contrast, the language obsolescence issues faced by the Ros Muc community, though superficially not as severe, are enmeshed in what would be considered more pressing issues of socio-economic marginalization.

Key words: *Gaeltacht, Ros Muc, Ráth Cairn, language maintenance, language endangerment*

Introduction

This research presents data from two contrasting Irish-speaking districts (Gaeltachtaí) and aims to highlight the socio-linguistic challenges posed by contact and endangerment aspects of these two communities. Ráth Cairn (RC) is a small Gaeltacht community (Gaelt.), situated in the eastern county of Meath consisting of seven townlands (townlands in

Ireland refer to small historical subdivisions of land which make up electoral districts or baronies when combined with adjacent townlands). It was established as an Irish-speaking district between 1935 and 1937 when forty families from Conamara (CN) in Co. Galway settled in the area on farms acquired for them by the Land Commission, a state agency

charged with land redistribution in the post-independence era. However, Ráth Cairn was not granted official recognition as an official Gaeltacht region until 1967, following political agitation by the inhabitants^{1–6}. Ros Muc (RM), on the other hand, is a coastal community of Conamara, Co. Galway, in the west of Ireland, consisting of nine townlands. In contrast to Ráth Cairn, Ros Muc is a district of what could be termed the 'organic' Gaeltacht. Conamara in general withstood the language shift of the nineteenth century, to which County Meath (CM) had succumbed almost totally by the close of the 1800's. The native speakers of Irish from Conamara who established Ráth Cairn as an Irish-speaking district had to contend with the surrounding English-speaking community, while Ros Muc is part of the wider Irish-speaking community of Conamara.

Gathering the Data

The data presented here was gathered with the help of acquaintances in the two districts during various periods of field work between December 2001 and the Spring of 2003. I chose Ráth Cairn and Ros Muc for the purposes of this comparative study because they are comparable both in terms of geographic size and population, and also they are the two Gaeltacht areas I am most familiar with. This research identifies the RC community consisting of 426 people and that of RM comprising 461 people. This amounts to 128 households in the case of RC and 178 in RM.*

The Ráth Cairn community is far more mixed, from a socio-economic perspective, with a significant middle-class element to the community than that of Ros Muc. While unemployment exists in both communities, the numbers of unemployed in Ros Muc represent a very significant portion of the local population, especially among middle-aged men. Ros Muc is an isolated rural disadvantaged community, while many of Ráth Cairn's population can aspire to a quasi-suburban lifestyle because of relative prosperity and proximity to the capital.

Native speaker

The use of the term 'native speaker' (Nat. Sp) here conforms with the generally accepted usage, that of a competent speaker of Irish who acquires the language within a familial/communal setting.

Neo-native speaker

A neo-native speaker (Neo-nat.) also acquires the language in a familial/communal setting, but is the offspring of co-speakers of Irish who are not native speakers but speak Irish as their household language.

Semi-speaker

Semi-speakers (Semi-sp) tend to emerge from a mixed linguistic environment where (i) one parent is a bilingual Nat. Sp of Irish and the other is a monolingual speaker of English and when (ii) the Nat. Sp speaks Irish productively to the children as a second household language. The use of the term 'semi-speaker' here differs to the manner in which Dorian

* The individual data presented here mirrors the resident population of RM's nine townlands. The statistics for RC, however, do not include data from the entire geographic population; I have excluded data from about one hundred households mainly dwelling on the periphery of the official Gaeltacht who would be considered as part of the surrounding English-speaking Meath community rather the participants in the RC community. The vast majority of these households would not have been part of the official Gaeltacht prior to the extension of the Gaeltacht boundaries in RC in 1982. A more detailed discussion of the Ráth Cairn research data is presented in Ó Giollagáin 2003⁷.

TABLE 1
LINGUISTIC PROFILE OF RC – INDIVIDUAL DATA

	Infants	Primary educa- tion	Second level	3rd level	Teens/ twen- ties	30's	40's	50's	60's	70's	80's+
Nat. sp.	7	8	7	1	2	9	24	18	22	11	14
Neo-nat.	4	10	3	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
Semi-sp.	6	8	7	2	6	2	4	0	0	0	0
Co-sp.	0	42	26	4	4	8	13	7	1	0	0
Learner	0	0	0	0	2	8	6	2	0	1	0
Eng. sp.	13	14	11	2	1	13	32	23	8	2	3

(1981)* and Fishman employ the term^{8,9}. Its use here is restricted to those who acquire a high level of linguistic competence primarily through familial/communal effort rather than solely relying on formal pedagogical or institutional support. The more competent speakers in this linguistic grouping acquire a competency akin to native speaker ability^{10**}.

Co-speaker

Co-speakers (Co-sp) acquire Irish through some method of formal instruction, mainly by means of the Irish medium school system in the two areas. Co-speakers differ from the previous categories of speakers in that their competency in the language is achieved primarily outside the familial/communal context.

English speaker

English speakers referred to in this study are native speakers of English with no or a very limited competency in Irish. A few non-nationals reside in both areas who are all competent speakers of English, but some have also achieved a com-

petency in Irish to the level of a co-speaker. I have also included a small category of learners of Irish in the case of RC who have acquired a partial fluency in the language. This category is almost entirely composed of adult learners attending language courses organized by Comhar-chumann Ráth Cairn, which is the community co-operative organization in RC.

Individual Data

Linguistic competencies in RC and RM

Figure 1 indicates the comparative linguistic competencies that exist in both RC and RM. Linguistically RM is a far less complex community with 82.2% of the people surveyed being native speakers. The other categories in RM amount to: Neo-nat. (0.7%), Semi-sp (1.3%), Co-sp (8.7%), Eng. Sp (7.1%).

Comparable percentages for RC present a more mixed and complex linguistic scenario, with the three categories of Nat. Sp. (29%), Co-sp. (24.6%) and Eng. Sp. (28.6%) being of similar proportions. Neo-

* »Unlike the older Gaelic dominant bilinguals, the semi-speakers are not fully proficient in Gaelic. They speak it with varying degrees of less than full fluency, and their grammar (and usually also their phonology) is markedly aberrant in terms of the fluent speaker norm.«⁸

** »Some bilingual speakers, including some who are ambilingual, can be said to have two (occasionally more) native languages.«¹⁰

TABLE 2
LINGUISTIC PROFILE OF RM – INDIVIDUAL DATA

	Infants	Primary education	Second level	3rd level	Teens/twenties	30's	40's	50's	60's	70's	80's+
Nat Sp.	10	22	26	19	25	39	54	75	51	34	25
Neo-nat	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Semi-sp.	1	3	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Co-sp.	0	9	4	0	10	5	3	4	2	0	2
Eng. Sp.	11	0	0	0	7	5	0	7	3	0	0

nat. represent 4.9%; Semi-sp 8.2% and learners 4.7%.

Linguistic profile by age for Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath

A detailed discussion of the data of RC's linguistic profile is not feasible within the scope of this paper, but three readily recognizable socio-linguistic features of the RC community can be clearly identified in the data (Figure 2 and Table 1): (1) monolingual English speakers exist in every age cohort and are a significant section of the overall community, as we have seen above, at 28.6 % of the speakers surveyed in RC; (2) while native speakers of Irish are the largest categories of speakers overall, the community has an obvi-

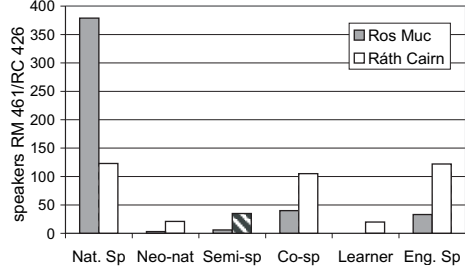


Fig. 1. Linguistic competence in Ros Muc and Ráth Cairn.

ous difficulty in reproducing their numbers in the younger cohorts, as evinced in the first four data bars (the childhood/adolescent cohorts)*, where native speakers only represent 13% of the total in these

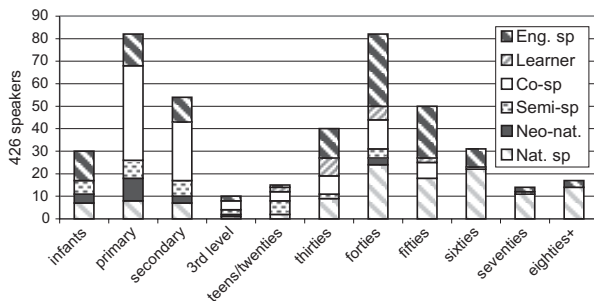


Fig. 2. Linguistic profile by age in Ráth Cairn.

* The '3rd level' bar refers to teenagers and people in their twenties involved in third level education and the 'teens/twenties' bar represents the data of those in the same age group who are no longer engaged in formal education.

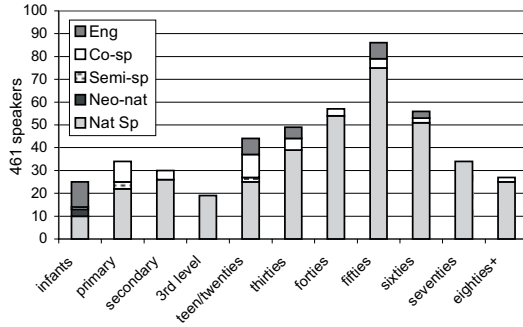


Fig. 3. Linguistic profile by age in Ros Muc.

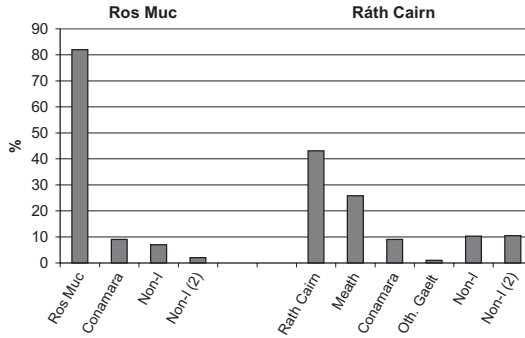


Fig. 4. Background of speakers in Ros Muc and Ráth Cairn.

four cohorts; (3) co-speakers, at 41%, are the most productive category in the four youngest cohorts and the data for this category, especially in the primary and secondary cohorts, indicates a level of institutional success on the part of the Irish-medium school and college in the area in producing Irish-speakers*. English-speakers amount to 23% of the total in the four youngest cohorts.

Linguistic profile by age for Ros Muc, Co. Galway

The data from RM's linguistic profile (Figure 3 and Table 2) indicate clearly a major social difficulty and highlights an

emerging socio-linguistic challenge to this predominantly Irish-speaking community. The RM data for the four youngest cohorts would suggest that the community has to contend with the social fall-out of significant demographic decline in the area. An obvious negative socio-linguistic consequence of this decline can be seen in the data for RM's infant cohort, where monolingual English-speakers outnumber the native speakers of Irish in this cohort (Eng. Sp 44% and Nat. Sp 40%). However, unlike RC, the school-going categories indicate that RM succeeds in diminishing English monolingualism completely in the case of school children. In

* It is possible for children living within the official Gaeltacht boundaries to attend English-medium schools in the surrounding region.

addition to the socio-economic and demographic difficulties, the RM community now sees itself confronted with major socio-linguistic challenges despite not having concentrated to the same extent as the RC community on developing communal and co-operative structures and resources.

Regional background of speakers surveyed in RC and RM

The following chart (Figure 4) indicates the regional background of all the speakers surveyed in the two areas irrespective of linguistic competence. The RM data in this regard indicates a highly homogeneous community with 91% of the RM community either being natives of Ros Muc or of the surrounding Conamara community. RC is much more varied in this regard. The data here for RC helps, to some extent, to unravel the linguistic complexity of the area. In the case of the RC community as identified here, 43% are RC natives of Conamara ancestry, 26% can trace their origins to the English-speaking Meath community; and residents in RC of neither Gaeltacht, RC nor Meath origin (non-local) amount to 21% of the community there.

Household Data

Profile of household language for Ráth Cairn

While in overall terms, Irish-speaking households amount to 47% of all the households as differently constituted in the area, the percentage breakdown for the critical 'family' category, from a socio-linguistic perspective, portrays a more problematic statistical comparison for RC as a designated Irish-speaking district or an official Gaeltacht. The data category 'family' for the purposes of this study refers to a nuclear family with offspring engaged in any of the three levels of formal education. The category 'generation' is

predominantly constituted of mature household units consisting of an elderly parent sharing a house with unmarried mature offspring, but households consisting of three generations and single parent families are also included in this category. The English-speaking households (26.5% of the total households) in this 'family' category are far more numerous than their Irish-speaking equivalent at 14.8% of the total households surveyed in RC. The 'sole occupancy' category is also linguistically telling. These households are predominantly made up of elderly people living alone. The Irish-speaking percentage for this category represents 9.3% of the total, while 3.9% is the equivalent English-speaking figure (Figure 5).

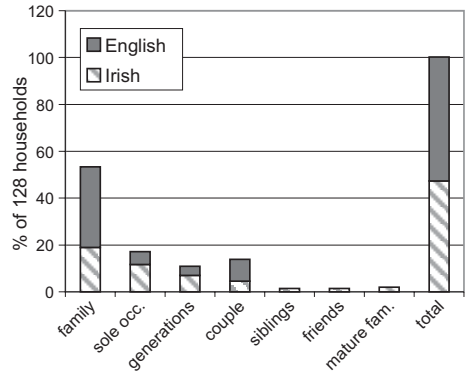


Fig. 5. Household language in Ráth Cairn.

Profile of household language for Ros Muc

The household language data for Ros Muc displays a more robust Irish-speaking configuration in comparison to RC, but ominously the predominantly middle-aged/elderly 'sole occupancy' category – 15.7% of the total households – although entirely Irish-speaking is greater than the 'family' category, at 12.3% of the total. English-speaking 'families' constitute 3.9% of the total for RM, while across

all the categories English-speaking households amount to 10.1% of the households surveyed in RM (Figure 6).

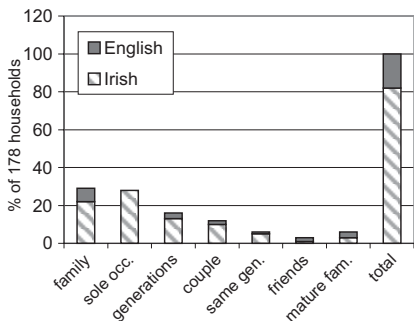


Fig. 6. Household language in Ros Muc.

based Irish-speaking in the RC community.
Profile of the parental background of Irish-speaking families in RM

The corresponding data for RM, presented in Figure 8, portrays a simpler locally generated configuration in this regard. The Irish-speaking family units are constituted almost entirely from either RM couples or an RM native with a partner from the surrounding Irish-speaking Conamara community. In contrast to RC, the production of neo-native and semi-speakers is extremely marginal in RM.

Profile of the parental background of Irish-speaking families in RC

The data in the following chart (Figure 7) indicates that non-local couples are the most productive family units in RC with regards to family-generated Irish-speaking ability. These correspond to the family units that produce the neo-native speakers. The semi-speaking generating family units, consisting of a female native speaker from RC with a partner from Co. Meath depict an interesting gender aspect to the production of the next most numerous Irish (semi-) speaking family units in this household category. The data here shows that RC is dependent to a large degree on non-native RC Irish speakers in order to bolster the family

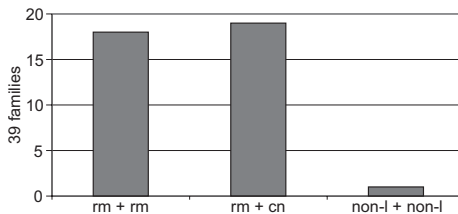


Fig. 8. Parental background of Irish-speaking families in Ros Muc.

Profile of the parental background of English-speaking families in RC

The gender aspect to the distribution of family language in RC can again be clearly seen in the following data (Figure 9) which indicates the parental back-

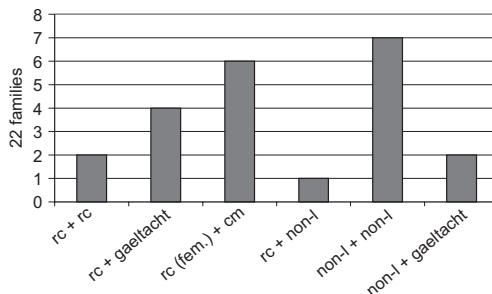


Fig. 7. Parental background of Irish-speaking families in Ráth Cairn.

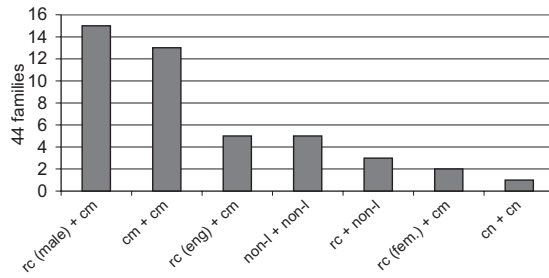


Fig. 9. Parental background of English-speaking families Ráth Cairn.

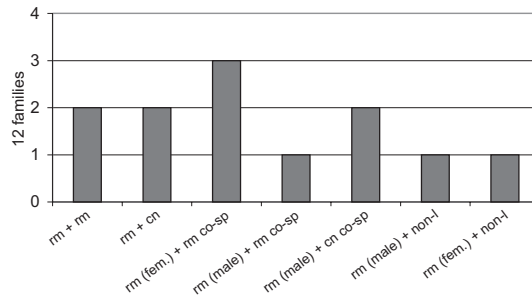


Fig. 10. Parental background of English-speaking families in Ros Muc.

ground of the English-speaking families in the area ('family' here also refers to the data category as discussed above). Native speaking RC males with a partner from Co. Meath correspond to 34% of the English-speaking families surveyed in the area. CM couples integrated into the RC community, mainly by means of their children attending the local school or college, account for 29.5% of this family sector of the community.

Profile of the parental background of English-speaking families in RM

The comparable RM statistics (Figure 10) for the family data indicate that English-speaking families are far less prevalent than in Ráth Cairn, but curiously they unearth a socio-linguistic trait not present in the RC data. Couples in RM consisting only of native speakers (the first two data bars) yet who raise their children as English-speakers amount to

33% of this English-speaking 'family' category; this percentage increases to 83% of this category if native speakers with a co-speaking partner are added to this particular calculation. It is also noteworthy that the data for English-speaking family parental background is the only analytical category that displays a corresponding level of relative complexity to that of the RC data.

Concluding Observations

Again due to considerations of space, a detailed discussion cannot be presented here. However, the data permit the following observations:

- Minoritized languages exhibit frailty in relation to contact issues;
- As minoritized speech communities become more complex/mixed they tend towards an institutionalization of speaking;

- The increase in the numbers of speakers in a minoritized speech community indicates a level of success in the face of the challenges of language shift, but it poses a major corresponding challenge in relation to intergenerational language transmission;
- Minoritized speech communities with undermined social cohesion are more likely to display lethargy in fostering a communal and cultural dynamic to challenge the pressures of language shift;
- The challenge for minoritized speech communities is to develop a communal dynamism on as a broad a sphere as possible (socio-cultural, institutional and discursive) to bolster the resolve of the community to foster language as a valuable communal resource.

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KONTRASTIVNI POGLED NA JEZIČNU DINAMIKU U REPUBLICI IRSKOJ

SAŽETAK

U ovom se članku iznosi lingvističkoantropološka analiza jezične dinamike dviju geltaških zajednica (tj. irskih govornih područja), Ros Muca u Conamari u oblasti Galway i Rath Cairna u oblasti Meath. U istraživanju se naglašava ono što bi se moglo smatrati sociolingvističkim paradoksom. Naime, zajednica Rath Cairn koja daleko više nastoji sačuvati jezik te pokazuje višu svijest o jezičnoj politici i ideologiji unutar zajednice, u sociolingvističkom je smislu manje uspješna od druge zajednice, Ros Muc, u kojoj je društvenoekonomska klima mnogo nepovoljnija od one u Rath Cairnu. Čini se da razmjern društvenoekonomske uspjeh zajednice Rath Cairna prikriva slabost koja se očituje u društvenokulturnoj krhkosti i jezičnoj ugroženosti. Nasuprot tome, problem zaboravljanja jezika u Ros Mucu, iako naizgled ne tako ozbiljan, povezan je s pritiskom uzrokovanim društvenoekonomsom marginalizacijom.