

## Family language policy, first language Irish speaker attitudes and community-based response to language shift

Tadhg Ó hifearnáin\*

*School of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communication, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland*

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This paper describes the complex and sometimes ambiguous attitudes of Gaeltacht Irish speakers towards the intergenerational transmission of Irish. It focuses on first language speaker data that was gathered as part of a larger field-based project among fluent, habitual speakers of Irish in the Múscraí Gaeltacht region in County Cork, Ireland, and compares the finding to Ó Riagáin's study of the more strongly Irish-speaking Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht some 20 years beforehand. It concludes by describing a contemporary in-group initiative to encourage Irish-language socialisation and some of the challenges faced in persuading Irish speakers of the merits of an all-Irish household approach to language retention.

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**Keywords:** intergenerational transmission; family language policy; Gaeltacht; Irish

### Introduction

Joshua Fishman has argued for more than three decades that the core element on which successful minority language maintenance depends is intergenerational transmission of the language from parents to their children in the home, to the extent that it remains or becomes the everyday language of informal communication among three generations of speakers (Fishman 1991, 2001). 'Without intergenerational mother-tongue transmission', he says, 'no language maintenance is possible. That which is not transmitted cannot be maintained' (Fishman 1991, 113). Intergenerational transmission is Stage 6 on Fishman's proposed Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), which he developed as an analytical tool to characterise the degree to which a language is endangered and as a device to help those concerned with language maintenance and revitalisation. Fishman repeats in many places in his work that this stage is the most critical as, in his view, it cannot be substituted or bypassed. Additionally, he argues (Fishman 1991, 65) that language maintenance is not 'a global "total language" task' but a functionally specific process that has to be tackled on well-selected, functionally specific grounds. This ties the intergenerational transmission concept closely to his hypothesis of minority language maintenance thriving within stable diglossia, wherein discrete domains of usage exist or should be created for languages within a bilingual or multilingual family and speech community.

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\*Email: [tadhg.ohifearnain@ul.ie](mailto:tadhg.ohifearnain@ul.ie)

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45 Despite the intuitive support for the logic of this argument in language planning discourse around the world, the crucial nature of the home in intergenerational transmission and the functional differentiation of language usage have been among the most critiqued aspects of Fishman's contribution to the field, and remain central to debate and research. Edwards (2010) likens the GIDS to a Richter Scale of disruption that describes the scale of the damage, but is not fine-tuned enough to provide a solid structure for analysis of a language contact situation nor to provide sound advice to language activists. Drawing on the experience of Irish and of  
50 Scottish Gaelic in Scotland and Canada, among others, he proposes a typology based on 11 disciplinary approaches that address three areas: the speaker, the language, and the context. He advises that these intertwined 33 cells would form a much more worthwhile starting base for research and intervention.

55 Romaine (2006), while sharing Fishman's concern for the survival of languages, also has grave doubts about whether his framework is appropriate for the stabilisation and eventual revitalisation of endangered languages as fully functioning native languages. She believes that we need to reconceptualise what it means for a language to be maintained without intergenerational transmission as a mother tongue, and to understand the role of community and other institutions in that  
60 endeavour. She critiques Fishman's domain theory approach, which seeks to bolster the home as the key site for minority language maintenance, as possibly undermining revitalisation goals, arguing that 'conceptions of languages are ideologically linked to and entangled with other dualities' (Romaine 2006, 445) such as nature/culture, primitive/civilised, intuitive/rational, sentimental/practical, backward/modern, rural/  
65 urban, in ways that laid the basis for the original language shift from the minoritised to dominant language:

70 Ironically, in jettisoning their own languages and embracing the dominant language, minority language speakers brought about the restriction of their vernaculars to those spheres of church, family and domestic life in terms of which the dominant discourse had, in effect, already characterised the whole culture. (Romaine 2006, 445)

In such circumstances, the fronting of the home domain as the centre of revitalisation endeavours serves to confirm the present-day diglossic distribution of language roles and, at best, serves to maintain a language's endangered status.

75 The many critiques of Fishman's approaches, and the debates about mother-tongue transmission, do not recommend abandoning home transmission as a core concern for language maintenance and management, but highlight the fact that intergenerational transmission remains somewhat ill-defined, and that we still do not know enough about intergenerational transmission as a process to adequately support it (King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry 2008). As Romaine (2006, 442) puts it, 'we  
80 know much more about shift than about reversing it; that is to say, we understand more about how diversity is lost than about how it is maintained'. King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry (2008) identify a gap in the overall understanding of family language policy because the issues concerned have been approached by language acquisition scholars from psychology of language perspectives on the one hand, much of it still  
85 informed by studies of monolingual acquisition in monolingual contexts that are not wholly appropriate to bilingual and minority language settings, and by sociolinguists with language policy and planning orientations on the other, drawing on the sociology of education, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics. They draw the

90 conclusion that ‘in contrast to how it is often conceptualised in the sociolinguistic  
and language policy literature, intergenerational transmission is not binary, but a  
much more dynamic, muddled and nuanced process’ (King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry  
2008, 917). We are yet to understand why people who were brought up with the same  
family language background, in the same location, attending the same schools and  
95 with similar extended social networks can have very diverse profiles with regard to  
language proficiency in both the minoritised and dominant languages and even have  
opposing attitudes and practices within their linguistic repertoires.

Ó Riagáin (1997), on evidence from the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht area in West  
Kerry, proposes that the crucial factors determining the extent of children’s  
bilingualism in the home are both the linguistic resources and the dispositions of  
100 the parents towards Irish and English. He shows that if one or both of the parents  
have limited Irish, it is probable that English will become the language of the  
household, but that the corollary does not necessarily hold. Two native speakers of  
Irish will not necessarily speak Irish between themselves, or with their children.  
In such cases, the linguistic resource is present, but a specific family language policy  
105 in favour of Irish may be absent or ill-defined. Ó Riagáin shows that in homes where  
both parents were native Irish speakers, over three generations there was a slippage  
of 15% in high Irish proficiency in each generation. As his data shows that homes  
where only one parent had a high proficiency in Irish, and homes where parental  
language ability was lesser all produced children who had substantially lower levels  
110 of language proficiency, he concludes that neither education nor community can  
satisfactorily replace the home as an ‘effective agency in language reproduction’  
(Ó Riagáin 1997, 113). It is thus salient to ask what mechanisms can be created to  
help parents who have the linguistic competence to pass Irish effectively on to their  
children, but who live in a context where simply speaking Irish as a parent and living  
115 in a community where Irish is one of the community languages will not suffice to  
produce children competent in Irish. If this is the scenario facing parents of the  
highest linguistic ability, strategies and support for mixed language families and for  
the large numbers who may be less competent in Irish are also the concern of  
language promotion policies.

120 If a prescriptive, all-encompassing policy to encourage minority language  
maintenance and revitalisation based on intergenerational transmission remains  
elusive, if not illusory, persuading first language Irish speakers of the merits of  
transmitting Irish to their children in the home, and encouraging those who have  
learnt Irish to a high standard to transmit it to their children in a similar fashion has  
125 been a core concern of state and community language policy since the foundation of  
the Irish state in the early twentieth century. It cannot be presumed that all Irish  
speakers, or speakers of any other displaced language, have an inherent disposition to  
raise their children in the minority language. If this was the case, no societal language  
shift may have occurred in the first instance. Neither can one conclude that Irish  
130 speakers’ overtly expressed desire for their children to be bilingual (Ó hÍfearnáin  
2007), is evidence of a lack of commitment to the intergenerational transmission of  
Irish as the main home language. Nevertheless, many Gaeltacht studies have  
observed a mismatch between overtly positive attitudes to Irish among speakers,  
and their language practices at home and in raising their children (see also Simpson  
135 [2013] concerning indigenous communities in Australia). Consequently, Ó Riagáin  
(1997, 107) suggests that while the home is critical for language reproduction, it is  
also the first domain to demonstrate language shift as ‘while community use of

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Irish . . . remain[s] high, the levels of use between married respondents and between  
140 parents and children are currently at noticeably lower levels'. While the relationship  
between home and community language is complex, the following discussion  
highlights the attitudes of first language speakers to intergenerational transmission,  
and the experiences of a community-based initiative in one Gaeltacht area to  
enhance Irish usage in the home with a view to increasing language competence,  
practice and favourable attitudes.

#### 145 **First language Irish speakers**

It is difficult to set out objective criteria to define a first language speaker of Irish.  
In Ireland, the state's census gathers data on self-reported linguistic competence  
(does one speak Irish or not) and, since 1996, on frequency of speaking it (daily,  
150 weekly, less often or never), although without providing the respondent with any  
criteria as to what constitutes usage of the language in order to make a judgement.  
By contrast, in Northern Ireland, questions are asked about receptive and productive  
skills in Irish (and Ulster Scots), and in 2011 respondents could also declare their  
'main language'. In neither jurisdiction is a question asked about 'mother tongue', as  
155 is the case in censuses in many other countries. Even if such a question was to be  
asked, it is unlikely that the responses would be useful from an objective linguistic  
view due to a strong language ideology in Ireland which regards Irish as being native  
to all, even those who do not speak it (*Ó hIfearnáin, in press*). In Gaeltacht areas,  
where Irish is still spoken as a community language, informants may judge their  
160 linguistic skills in terms which are less abstract due to a level of linguistic awareness  
which is not present in areas where habitual Irish speakers are in a tiny minority.  
As Niedzielski and Preston (2003) argue, folk linguists and perceptual dialectologists  
have long recognised that the 'folk' know a great deal about the language varieties  
that they speak and hear. Their own definitions and interpretations of speaker ability,  
165 quality, stance and style, once contextualised, can provide an extremely valid and  
useful basis for scientific analysis. In-group definitions and attitudes are at the core  
of the discussion that follows, and reveal perceptions of actual language practices as  
well as a range of overt, openly expressed, beliefs about language accompanied by  
more deeply held attitudes and ideologies that lie below the surface.

#### 170 **Methodology**

This paper is concerned with the attitudes and practices of first language Gaeltacht  
170 Irish speakers to home language use and intergenerational transmission. The data is  
drawn from a sociolinguistic study of the Múscraí Gaeltacht area in western County  
Cork, in the southwest of Ireland. The quantitative study was carried out from early  
2000 to late 2003, followed by qualitative work during 2004, with open-ended further  
175 discussion and feedback sessions over the following years. Múscraí is a small  
Gaeltacht region where Irish bilingualism is under great pressure from English  
monolingualism. The area had a population of 3401 according to the 2002 *Census of  
Ireland*, which took place during the field research. That figure was provided by the  
Central Statistics Office, who had only published figures for the whole of the County  
180 Cork Gaeltacht at the time, which also include the small Gaeltacht island of Cléire  
off the south coast. Some 2707 (79.6%) of the total population claimed to be able to  
speak Irish on census day, but only 1207 (35.5%) said they did so on a daily basis.

There is considerable variation in ability and usage within this small region. The project divided the area into four linguistic zones according to the percentage of daily users of Irish in the census data, setting out sub-areas that corresponded closely to local perceptions of language communities and group vitality in the area.

The project only investigated the language abilities, practices and ideologies of fluent Irish speakers in the region, not those of the population as a whole. It is thus not methodologically wholly comparable to Ó Riagáin's (1992) research in Corca Dhuibhne (the west Kerry Gaeltacht), which included a broader range and concentrated on the dynamics of language transmission at home and in the broader community. The quantitative questionnaire did, however, take many elements of Ó Riagáin's as its core structure. In interviewing only Irish speakers, the project sought to understand the sociolinguistic dynamics of a minority Irish-speaking community from inside, regardless of the linguistic background of the speakers. The work was carried out through the medium of Irish by the author and a team of local field work assistants so as to use high fluency in the language as a gate-keeping function, with the only other criteria being that the interviewees spoke Irish regularly, in order to approximate the sampling model to the census data. The goal was to interview one third of all the daily Irish speakers in the area over 15 years old, in proportion to their distribution by age group and sex. This was broadly achieved, with some minor deviations from the model explained in Ó hIfearnáin (2007, 2008). Two hundred and thirty-nine valid questionnaires were completed (see Table 1).

In the subsequent 2006 and 2011 censuses of population, the frequency of use question was refined to ask if respondents spoke Irish daily outside the education system as well as within it. As Irish is a core curriculum subject in Ireland and Irish-medium schools function throughout the country as well as in the Gaeltacht, the census data can now tell us the number of pupils, teachers and support staff who might only use Irish on a daily basis because of the educational system and also the numbers who use it otherwise in their daily lives. In the 2000–2003 quantitative fieldwork, 46 interviews were carried out with 15- to 19-year-olds, most of whom were in the final years of secondary schooling, in higher education, or working. There were 165 'daily speakers' of Irish recorded in the 2002 census for that age cohort. The 2011 census (Central Statistics Office 2012) shows that there were

Table 1. Daily speakers of Irish in each area within the Múscraí Gaeltacht (Census of Population 2002) and the numbers in the valid survey.

Sub-area	15–19 years	20–29 years	30–44 years	45–59 years	60 years +
1 Cúil Aodha					
Census	25	28	40	34	37
Survey: 56	8	17	10	7	14
2 Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh					
Census	48	22	64	41	45
Survey: 89	15	17	25	13	19
3 Baile Mhic Íre					
Census	67	25	65	69	66
Suirbhé: 75	16	9	21	17	12
4 Cill na Martra					
Census	25	13	25	18	23
Survey: 19	7	3	4	3	2

Source of Census Statistics: special tabulation by the Central Statistics Office.

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111 daily speakers of Irish outside the education system in the 25- to 35-year-old cohort (29% of the whole cohort) in the County Cork Gaeltacht (which must include a very small number in Cléire as well as the main group in Múscraí). It is not possible to analyse the inward and outward migration of Irish speakers, nor the changes in personal language practices over the period from the data available, but it is reasonable to assume that a large number of those interviewed are now to be found in that 2011 cohort.

The survey sample was built using the friend-of-a-friend technique, whereby local knowledge enabled initial contact in each age cohort in each sub-area, and then informants suggested the names of others, who were interviewed in turn until the quota was reached. This is a very effective way to engage with a very small population, and nobody who was approached to complete the quantitative questionnaire refused to do so. The resulting data reflect the attitudes and practices of a significant proportion of the most fluent regular speakers of Irish in this Gaeltacht area, who all had the potential to speak Irish to a great extent in their home environment. The participants were asked if they believed their first language to be Irish, English, or both. The survey did not include a model to determine how much Irish was spoken at home by those who claimed both Irish and English as their first language, nor how much English was spoken in houses which claimed to be Irish only. All Irish speakers are bilingual and although one could legitimately make the case that all contemporary first language speakers of Irish could equally claim a native competence in English, in the context of Irish-medium research among Gaeltacht Irish speakers, those fluent speakers who say Irish was their first language reveal information not just about the language practices in their childhood household but also a clear family language policy, even if such a policy had never been overtly described, as exclusive use of Irish (rather than a mixed language or English-dominant upbringing) was an exceptional, minority practice.

Table 2 shows a breakdown of informants' reported first languages and how they rated their competence in spoken Irish at the time of the field research, and Figure 1 shows the first language Irish speakers' current linguistic competence by age group. Percentages have been used in the Table to facilitate comparisons between cases, but the numbers in each cell can be very small, meaning that percentages can swing widely due to the presence of one or two individuals in some cases. It is the order within the pattern which is important to consider. It is striking that 13 interviewees described their current ability as 'only able to speak simple sentences or a few words',

Table 2. First language of respondents and claimed ability in speaking Irish at time of field research (rounded to nearest whole percentage).

		How well do you speak Irish now?					<i>n</i>
		A few words (%)	Simple sentences (%)	Parts of conversations (%)	Most conversations (%)	Completely fluent/native ability (%)	
First language	Irish			5	10	86	84
	Irish and English		4	10	21	65	81
	English	11	3	9	38	39	74
Total		3	2	8	22	64	239



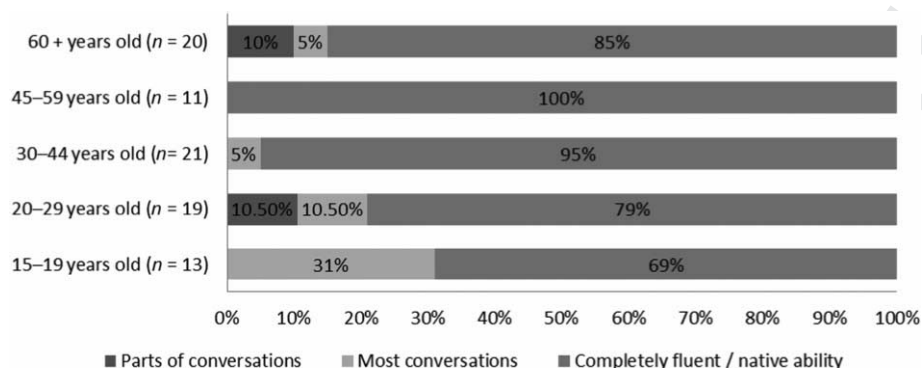


Figure 1. Age of respondents with Irish as a first language and their reported level of speaking competence.

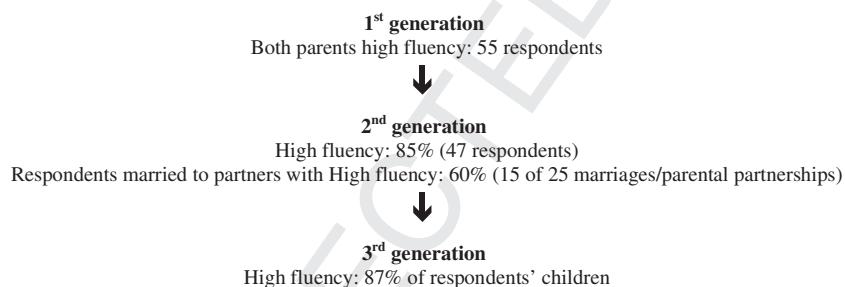


Figure 2. Intergenerational transmission of ability among first language speakers of Irish where both parents have native/high fluency.

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despite their ability to meet the criteria for the study. As questionnaires from those unable to engage in an interview in Irish about these relatively complex issues were discarded, this shows a heightened awareness among these speakers of their linguistic limitations within the peer group. Some 84 respondents reported that they had been brought up in Irish only, at least in their early years, and these are the focus of the current discussion. Only 86% of these first language speakers claimed to have a high proficiency in the language at the time of the field work. This was revealed in response to a series of questions about their own and other people's language competences that were separated in the questionnaire from the opening one about respondents' language background, in order to avoid simplistic answers equating competence with the first language spoken in youth. These results are consistent with the ITÉ study conducted in the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht in 1983 (Ó Riagáin 1997) which, when analysing the influence of parents' ability in Irish on their children, found that only 85% of those whose parents both were reported as being of high ability were of high ability in Irish themselves.

A similar pattern is revealed in the transmission of Irish by parents of high fluency in the Cork Gaeltacht over three generations. Figure 1 shows that 55 respondents who claimed Irish as their first language were brought up in houses where both parents had high proficiency in Irish. It is noteworthy that 72 of the 84 informants in the cohort reported that their fathers spoke fluent, native Irish,

270 while only 65 reported that ability for their mother. Although too small to show a  
 conclusive pattern, this is in keeping with a general sociolinguistic trend for male  
 conservatism and female innovation in language change and shift, but also points to  
 commonality with data from a 2005 Gaeltacht-wide survey of 970 senior cycle school  
 275 pupils, 46 of whom were in the Múscraí region (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2007) that found  
 that 45% of fathers and 38% of Gaeltacht mothers had fluent Irish and that fathers  
 were more likely to be from the immediate area than mothers.

In the Múscraí sample, 85% of the children from the previous generation of fluent  
 speaker couples claimed the highest proficiency levels. Of those respondents whose  
 partners had a high proficiency in Irish, 87% claimed that their own children also  
 280 have that level, showing the same order of transmission levels as Corca Dhuibhne.  
 Despite the small number of fluent Irish speakers in the locality and the very small  
 percentage of highly proficient Irish speakers nationally, the level of endogamy in this  
 sample is high. Sixty per cent of married respondents, all of whom had children, were  
 married to other members of the linguistic in-group. Just under 80% of first language  
 285 fluent Irish speakers in this study ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that they belonged to a  
 distinct cultural minority group within Ireland. The state’s language policy regards  
 Gaeltacht speakers as communities of bilingual practice within a national bilingual  
 context, but their self-description as a distinct group from the national population  
 based on their home language practices may well make it more appropriate to  
 290 compare them to the many ethnolinguistic minorities in Central and Eastern Europe  
 to whom are accorded rights to political representation, mother-tongue education  
 and state services by virtue of their minority linguistic and cultural status  
 (Ó hIfearnáin, in press).

First language Irish speakers who are brought up at home with highly proficient  
 295 parents are the focus of this discussion because it has been shown that this is the  
 group most likely to use the language and pass it on to the next generation. It does  
 not follow, however, that the continuous decline in perceived proficiency in each  
 generation, accompanied by a decline in the number of households which have this  
 ideal profile, necessarily means that Irish is doomed as a community or indeed as a  
 300 first language, as Hindley (1990) and others have asserted. The ‘loss’ of 40% of our  
 sample to non-fluent Irish-speaking marriage partners and the consistent inter-  
 generational slippage of 15% among those who do marry in-group, do represent a  
 very major challenge. Nevertheless, the Cork data show that significant proportions  
 of children brought up in a mixed-language household or even in one where no Irish  
 305 was spoken also claimed high levels of fluency and contribute to the daily usage  
 figures (Table 2 and Figure 1). There are many eloquent and committed Irish  
 speakers in all Gaeltacht regions who have such a background. The breakdown of  
 proficiency of fluent speakers’ partners and children in Table 3 gives a sketch of these  
 outcomes. The study of this important group of speakers with mixed backgrounds is,  
 310 however, outside the scope of the present paper.

### **Intergenerational transmission: attitudes and practices**

The linguistic competence to bring children up in Irish is not sufficient for intergen-  
 315 erational transmission without parents being motivated to do so. Bringing children  
 up to speak Irish in a bilingual context dominated by English, a powerful global  
 language that is present in every domain of societal usage, even in the Gaeltacht, is a  
 challenge. During the fieldwork in the Cork Gaeltacht, and in ongoing research on



Table 3. First language Irish speakers (all proficiencies) and the reported Irish fluency of their partners and children.

Partner's Irish	Children's Irish			n
	Very good	Moderate	Poor	
A few words		100%		1
Simple sentences		100%		4
Simple conversations	75%	25%		4
Most conversations	57%	43%		7
Fluent/native	83%	17%		18
No partner	50%	25%	25%	4
Totals	24	13	1	38

the home visitors scheme in the Kerry Gaeltacht, described below, parents have frequently remarked that there are no 'accidental' Irish speakers anymore. They say that in contemporary society a positive attitude and the presence of Irish in the family, community and in schooling are not sufficient supports for a child to acquire linguistic competency and confidence. There is some evidence, nevertheless, that Irish-speaking parents in some areas do still bring up their children as Irish speakers without any explicit plan to do so. In focus group research with 20 Irish-speaking households, Ó Giollagáin et al. (2007) found that 12 of the 15 who brought up their children in Irish did not make a motivated decision to do so. Although this was not the finding in the current research in Kerry and Cork, it does support the language policy hypothesis (Shohamy 2006; Spolsky 2004) that both overt and covert ideologies are at work, where an unmarked (implicit) policy is a policy all the same, regardless of whether or not it is consciously formulated.

King (2000, 169) argues that language ideologies, in this case what parents believe about the value and roles of languages in the family, are the mediating link between social organisation and language use. As Spolsky (2004, 2009) and Shohamy (2006) highlight, there are often several different, complementary or opposing language ideologies at work in communities and so families can be the arena for subtle, or open ideological conflicts as different members adhere to varying belief complexes about the value, place and utility of particular languages. Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998) discuss further how tensions can arise out of implicit conflicts between overt community ideology in favour of indigenous language revitalisation and community members' deeper, more hidden attitudes that undermine it (see also Simpson [2013]). These mismatches between positive attitudes to intergenerational language transmission and the actual practice thereof are present in Gaeltacht communities. In revitalisation efforts, it is crucial to understand the roots of these language ideologies, how they become enacted on the one hand (King et al. 2008) and how they might be modified through successful language management on the other.

Aware of the continuing widespread language shift to English among Irish-speaking families, the Irish state instituted a programme to encourage home usage in 1933, called *Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge* (SLG, the 'Irish-Speaking Scheme'). In its original form, from 1933 until 1992, it was a small grant given to families for each child who spoke Irish at home and who regularly attended a Gaeltacht school, where Irish was the only medium of learning. It was thus conceived as a tool in the implementation of a pro-Irish Gaeltacht policy which was based on an ideology

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favouring monolingual Irish practice at home and school. The coercive goal of SLG in influencing Irish family language policy is clear in the instructions to SLG inspectors from the Department of Education from 1936/1937 onwards:

To *inform* parents [“cur i dtuisicint”] became *drive home to parents* [“cur abhaile ar”], while *normal* home language [“i a bheith mar ghnáthurlabhra acu ina dtithe”] became *sole* language of the home *and no other* to be spoken with the children [“an Ghaeilge a chleachtadh mar aon-teanga ’na dtighe agus gan a mhalairt do labhairt le na gclóinn”]. (Quoted in Ó Glasáin 1990, 7)

While it is certain that bilingualism could not be achieved if English had a dominant role at home as well as in the wider world, it can be shown that Irish speakers only partially bought into the Irish-only ideology as it was counterintuitive to many who for generations had sought to learn English at the earliest opportunity. The qualitative data from the Cork survey discussed in Ó hIfean náin (2006, 2007) show that both parents who chose to speak Irish only with their children and those who mixed languages all believed that they were doing so in order to promote bilingualism, while comments from parents in the 1983 Kerry research (Ó Riagáin 1997) revealed weakening attitudes to Irish socialisation because of their ‘evaluation of the relative values of Irish and English as “cultural capital”’. However easy it is to demonstrate it *not* to be the case, many first language Irish speakers still have a covert fear of not achieving fluency in English if they only use Irish at home.

Figure 3 shows how the first language speakers believed their English to be below standard when starting school, even in the younger age cohorts, while the qualitative data exposed it as a source of mockery from other children and parents. This undoubtedly had a psychological effect, however much it could be rationally dismissed by the mature respondents. There is no data available to compare how English-only children viewed their own language skills when starting school, in the context of the low prestige accorded varieties of Irish English in the education system. In contrast, all first language Irish respondents over 30 years old said that their Irish was very good when starting school, whereas some individuals in

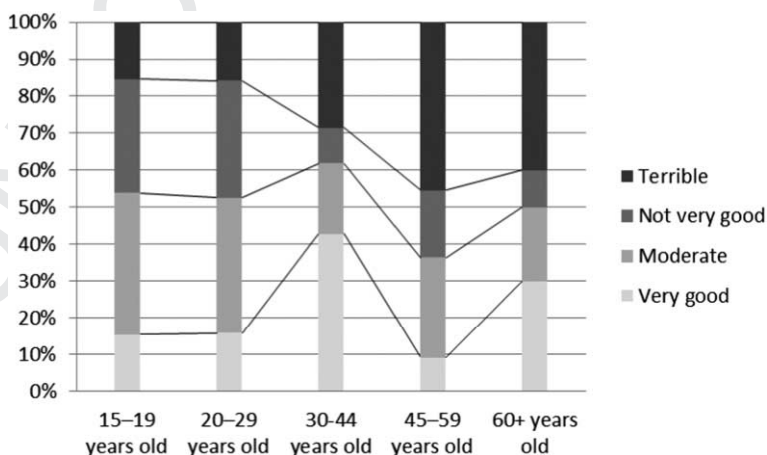


Figure 3. First language Irish speakers’ judgement of their own English when starting school.

the youngest cohorts said that neither their Irish nor their English was good when they started school.

385 From the school year 1993 until its abolition in 2011, SLG became a single grant given to households who applied for it, had children in fulltime education, and who met the linguistic criteria. In a detailed study of the scheme, Éamonn Ó Bróithe (2012), a scholar who worked previously with SLG's administration, highlights a change in its emphasis at that time. The declared aim was now to inspire the Gaeltacht people to advance the speaking of Irish at home and in the community, rather than to solicit monolingualism. Participants in the Cork Gaeltacht study saw the redesigned SLG grant as a kind of prize, while others described it as 'compensation' for extra costs and effort in raising Irish-speaking children. SLG has long been used by researchers and state agencies to judge the actual state of home transmission of Irish because of its reliance on an inspectorate rather than self-reporting. Ó Bróithe (2012) demonstrates, however, through analysis of the success rates and ages at which children first applied for the grant, and the difference in language proficiency between the oldest and youngest children in a family, that SLG better reflects high levels of language acquisition achieved by a mixture of home rearing, education and community. He concludes that SLG fails to identify Irish-speaking households clearly. In reality only 49–56% of households who were given the grant in the most strongly Irish-speaking communities and 33–37% in the weakest were actually primarily Irish-speaking.

400 The grant was awarded to an average of 35 families annually in the Múscraí Gaeltacht from the start of the new scheme until 2005, while 3143 households were awarded it in the Gaeltacht nationally. The numbers more than doubled in Múscraí in 2006. Ó Bróithe (2012) suggests that the explanation was in the enforcement of a rule for the reduced grant, which was given for up to three years to partially Irish-speaking households identified as having potential to increase the amount spoken. The reduced grant was awarded to over 100 households in Múscraí in some years. Faced with either discontinuing the grant to some families, which were on the borderline of the criteria after three years, yet who showed no sign of improving, it was felt fairer to award them the whole grant than to withdraw it altogether. It was common belief among Múscraí respondents that the reduced grant was awarded to families where one parent spoke Irish well and the children spoke Irish because of a mixture of upbringing and schooling.

415 In the 1983 study of the west Kerry Gaeltacht, Ó Riagáin (1992) notes a weak positive attitude to children's socialisation through Irish, as only 43% of respondents would use 'all Irish' or 'mostly Irish' with their children if starting a family today. It was lowest, at 25%, among the under 45s while 56% of older respondents would do so. The figures were only slightly higher in the more strongly Irish-speaking western area of his study. He suggests that this can be explained as the younger group is likely to be better educated, employed outside agriculture and to include in- and return migrants. While there certainly is a strong correlation between age, language competence, and attitude to Irish-only use in the home, there are probably additional reasons. In the Cork Gaeltacht study, the respondents were asked which language combinations they had used in raising their children and if they were to start again, which they would choose. In all cases, respondents wished in hindsight that they had used more Irish with their children, and the explanation from the qualitative follow-up is in the realisation amongst older parents that their offspring did not achieve as high a level of Irish as they would have liked (Ó hIfearnáin 2007). Both these studies

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suggest a clear mandate for language planners' engagement with young parents and potential parents in order to promote all-Irish households as the best way to achieve a high level of bilingualism.

435 Figure 4 confirms the general pattern discussed above in the case of first language Irish speakers. Only 44% of parents said they had spoken mostly Irish to their children, whereas 77% would do so if they were to start again. Although the majority of first language parents do believe that their children speak Irish reasonably well (Figure 5), they felt that more home usage would have given the children a much more solid grounding in later life. This observation came to the fore particularly among grandparents with regard to their perceptions of the productive language skills of their grandchildren.

440 On the broader ideological principle of bringing children up in an all-Irish households, the sample of first language Irish speakers showed consistently more positive responses than those reported in the general sample (Figures 6 and 7).

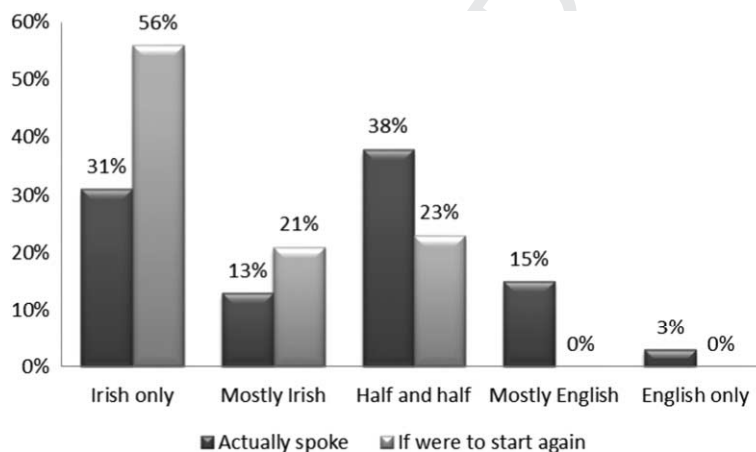


Figure 4. Languages spoken by first language Irish speakers to their children, compared to their language choice if they had the opportunity to start again.

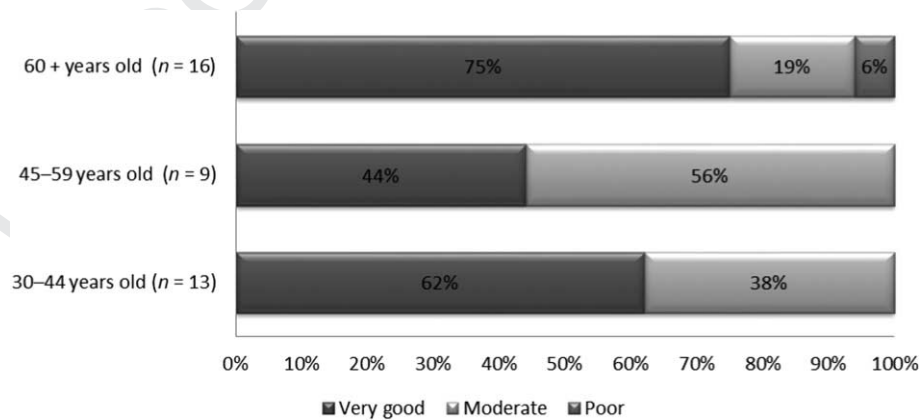


Figure 5. First language Irish speakers' opinion of the quality of their children's Irish, by parents' age group.

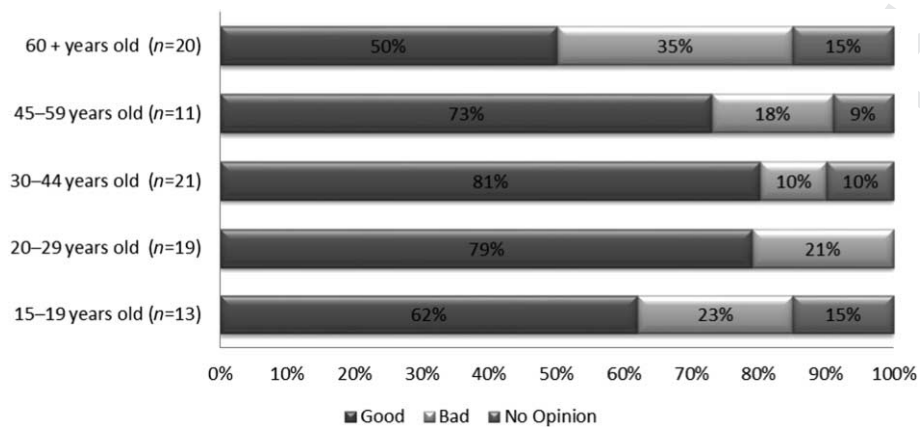


Figure 6. First language Irish speakers' opinion of whether it is good to bring up children in an Irish-only household.

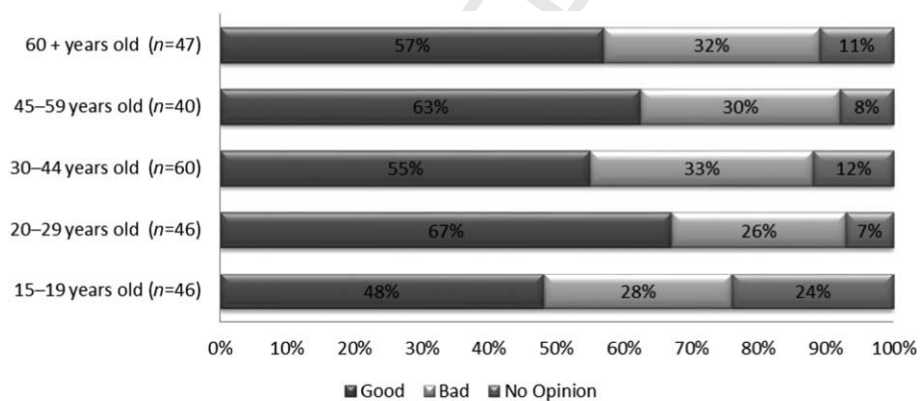


Figure 7. All fluent Irish speakers' opinion on whether it is good to bring up children in an Irish-only household.

445 This was to be expected as those brought up with Irish as a first language were for the most part the children of parents who, unlike most other parents, had chosen to bring them up as Irish speakers. However, only half of the first language speakers in the over 60 age cohort (many of whom were much older than 60) believed in the one-language principle. Comments in the interviews showed this to reflect a memory of a time in their own youth when some of their peers had real difficulties with English. The weaker support for family socialisation in the general fluent speaker population suggests that revitalisation efforts need to target that group.

450 There remains a certain ambiguity towards the goal of an all-Irish home among the first language speakers. Over a fifth of the under-30s were against the idea in principle, whereas among over-30s, up to a quarter favoured the 'half and half' approach. This is despite the fact that all couples with children thought that, in hindsight, they should have spoken more Irish with their children.

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**Young speakers' social use of Irish outside the home**

460 It has long been observed that minoritised languages are not as widely used as dominant ones among young people in bilingual and multilingual communities. Ó Bróithe (2012) shows how younger children in Irish-speaking families generally have less proficiency than older siblings, and with some exceptions that are explained by more active linguistic parenting, Ó Giollagáin et al. (2007) do likewise. As far back as 1926, the Gaeltacht Commission defined children under 7 years as Irish-speaking if their older siblings had an ordinary conversational knowledge of Irish, 465 implicitly recognising the issue (Coimisiún na Gaeltachta 1926). Respondents in the Múscraí fieldwork reported that high fluency levels of the youngest in a family were on average 8% below those of the oldest. As increasing numbers of bilingual children in the household come into contact with an English-dominant environment, so the 470 opportunities to speak Irish diminish and more English is spoken, leading to loss in lexical, grammatical and idiomatic complexity and a levelling or breaking down of the traditional dialectal variety over time, not just among the youngest speakers but among the wider peer group, leading to incomplete minority language acquisition, as has been described by Ó Curnáin (2007, 2012a, 2012b).

475 There was little difference between the age groups in the Múscraí research regarding their descriptions of the amount of Irish used in shops, post offices, banks, hotels, pubs and sports clubs, although the majority of the younger cohorts of first language speakers believed that there was the 'same' or 'less' amount of Irish spoken generally at that time than 10 years before while the majority of those over 30 480 believed there was the same or more. In contrast to the 45% of over 30s in the full survey who thought that children currently always or frequently used Irish among themselves, 75% of the under 30s thought that children only used Irish with each other 'occasionally', 'rarely' or 'not all'. Although the statistical base is very small, there is some salient data on the differences between first language speakers and the 485 larger fluent speaker group with regard to their own reported social usage.

In the overall sample, 38% reported using Irish 'always' or 'frequently' with their siblings while growing up, whereas among first language speakers (Figure 8), the figures were, as expected, much higher, despite a clear pattern of decline of usage in 490 each younger age cohort. Beyond the family circle few first language respondents reported using Irish extensively in their peer group, although about one in five reported having close friends with whom they always spoke Irish. The low levels of Irish used in peer groups observed in the Gaeltacht nationally and their further decline as they move from primary to secondary school (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2007) suggests that the Múscraí example is not atypical and that in the absence of any 495 change in the dynamic, Irish will continue to become less a spontaneous language of communication, and more one restricted to kin groups and established social contact networks. This is reinforced by an attitude that Irish should not be spoken if non-Irish speakers are present. 23 (72%) of the 32 first language respondents in the 15–29 cohorts were of that view. It is, however, probably too simplistic to judge the 500 sociolinguistic future of the language on frequency of usage in the young peer groups alone. We need to know more about the dynamics, quality, extent and longevity of its social use and how it evolves longitudinally, as well as understanding how newcomers from the much wider pool of fluent speakers might join such social networks, in order to develop strategies for revitalisation in such communities.



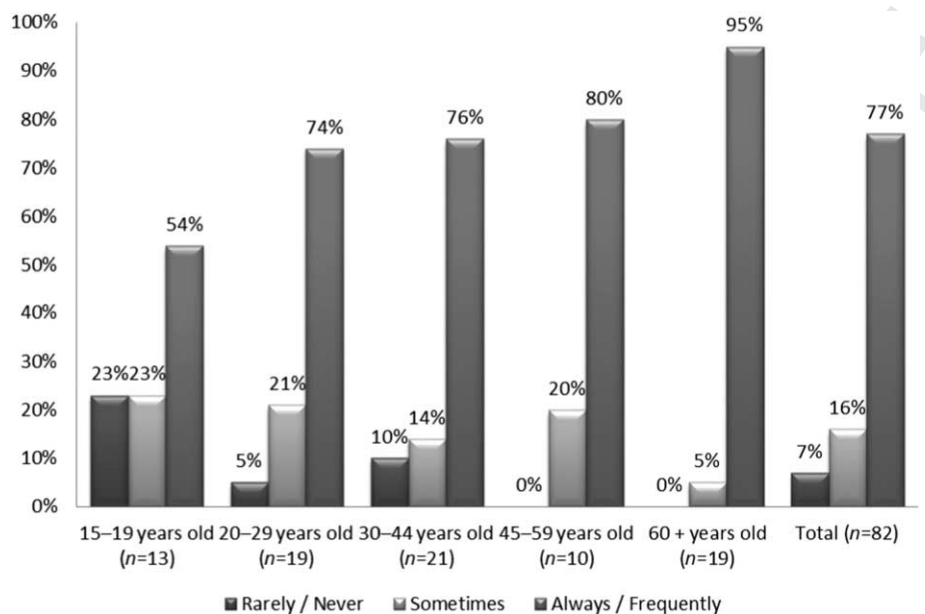


Figure 8. Use of Irish between first language siblings, as children.

***Tús Maith: the start of an in-group response***

Research such as that described above elucidates what language activists in some Gaeltacht regions had already recognised. In 2005, Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne, a cultural organisation that belongs to the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht’s development cooperative, launched a language support programme called *Tús Maith* [‘a good start’]. Although it receives public funding for defined project periods, it is a community designed and implemented initiative. A group interview with the coordinator and the project workers in October 2011 clarified many of the concerns and difficulties that Irish-speaking parents encounter in their endeavours to transmit Irish to the next generation, and explains some of the ambiguity in attitudes to raising children revealed in the *Múscraí* and earlier Corca Dhuibhne research project discussed above.

*Tús Maith*’s aim is to give advice and support to parents who are bringing up their children as Irish speakers in Corca Dhuibhne, and also now in the southern Kerry Gaeltacht region of Uíbh Ráthach, where Irish is much weaker as a community language. First inspired by similar schemes such as *Twf* in Wales and early childhood education programmes that had run in the past in other Gaeltacht areas and in Dublin (Ní Cathail 2003), it has evolved and innovated from the start. The first core activity was a home visitor programme. Very high fluency mothers who had raised their own children through Irish completed a training programme focused on language practices and language awareness in order to become ‘home visitors’, to go to households with young children whose parents were confronting problems with bringing them up in Irish. There was a lot of frustration at the beginning as many in the community could not see the programme’s utility. After discussions on Gaeltacht radio, leafletting, information sessions and even door-to-door information distribution, parents with pre-school age children started to sign up in 2006 and the scheme was gradually expanded to households with children in the 6–7 years age group.

The visitors work six hours per week with the households. Their work has ranged over a broad spectrum of activities, depending on the amount of Irish already spoken in the home and what the families hope to gain from the visit. The region was divided into geographical zones, which correspond loosely to the relative strength of Irish in the community, each of which has one visitor. The visitors suggest strategies to get children to speak more Irish, and also heighten awareness of services that are available, such as Irish-medium nursery schools and language assistance in the primary schools. In the more strongly Irish-speaking families, the visitors report that they might help out around the house while talking, for example, about local community history, family and place names, the names of fields, plants and animals, as these are elements of community knowledge which are being lost in the English-dominant, globalised world of children and young parents. They thus serve to enrich the language competence range of the household and anchor them further in their linguistic community. At the other end of the spectrum, the visitors help some families who have little command of Irish but are making efforts to integrate with the community, and who would not otherwise have the support to help with everything from the children's access to highly fluent adult Irish speakers to helping them understand their Irish-medium school work. The necessity of the community socialisation element was evident to the visitors from the start, and playgroups were organised for the children, and conversation circles, and coffee mornings for the young parents. By the 2011–2012 school year, there were monthly 1.5-hour Irish-only structured play groups running on Saturdays, and weekly activities included cooking classes for 7- to 12-year-olds, pottery classes, storytelling for 5- to 7-year-olds, as well as homework clubs, and public meetings about family language choices.

About 20 households a year received home-visitors, and after the first five years the visitors distributed a questionnaire to all the households who had participated. They all replied that the programme had lifted their morale and commitment, and the parents identified a number of factors that were constraints on their children, and which are ever present in a minoritised setting, such as a lack of Irish-speaking friends. The visitors underline a growing language awareness in the Irish-speaking community, but reported that over the first five years many parents still did not expect services (such as doctors, local authority, even education establishments) to be delivered in Irish and so did not try to make use of them, confining those domains to English. Many local service providers were slow to use Irish, even if Irish speakers themselves, and did not develop effective strategies to promote usage. There were also some tensions reported at times around the provision of Irish-only play groups and activities, as some Irish-speakers thought them 'elitist' because they were exclusive, but these were gradually diffused as the language development ethos was explained.

When *Tús Maith* started, it was modelled on promoting Irish within the bilingual context: a community-owned project in keeping with the overt language attitudes of many in Irish-speaking communities who favour bilingualism. In the early stages, only about 12–15% of participants were in Irish-only households. Attitudes favouring bilingualism which do not put strong emphasis on extensive home minority language use have been shown to be a weak strategy for linguistic maintenance. Language awareness in the community rather than authority-led coercion appears to be the most effective way to develop Irish-only family policies which would actually favour bilingualism (Ó hIfean náin 2006, 2007). In the future, *Tús Maith* aims to focus more directly on the needs of Irish-only households, from

580 home visitors through to socialisation activities, and has reached this conclusion  
 through its own experiences and community feedback. However, this important  
 staging post in changing minority language community attitudes and taking positive  
 action is occurring at the same time that state resolve to support Irish-only language  
 585 use in home, school and administration has weakened, growing out of a stance, also  
 very common in other contemporary European language policy settings, that  
 constructs speakers as customers and consumers of state services rather than  
 defining linguistic goals for the community. The research data presented and the  
 experiences of *Tús Maith* show that the early state language ideology that favoured  
 590 Irish-only home, education, administration and community as the main tools for  
 language revitalisation was correct in principle, but that in contemporary society a  
 more effective strategy is to persuade Irish speakers to maintain their language  
 through their own participation in language policy formation than to coerce them to  
 do so. The state's position regarding such a language policy and its role in its  
 implementation is currently unclear.

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