Social Media and Revitalization of the Celtic Languages

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1. The ECRML and the Celtic Languages

I'd like to talk about some of the ways minority language speakers in Europe are using social media to help revitalize their languages. I work primarily on Irish and the other Celtic languages, so I'll begin by focusing on those. Towards the end I'll try and give some statistics related to other European minority languages.

The six Celtic languages are divided into two groups: the so-called "Q-Celtic" languages (that's Irish, Scots, and Manx Gaelic), and the "P-Celtic" languages (Welsh, Breton, and Cornish), the names coming from a phonological divergence that manifests itself in certain common words such as the words for the numbers "four" and "five" and the word for "head": all of these begin with /p/ in P-Celtic languages and /k/ in Q-Celtic ("head" is "pen" in Welsh and "ceann" in Irish for example).

Of the Celtic languages, Irish and Welsh are by far the two strongest from the point-of-view of intergenerational transmission, education, broadcasting, and government support. Each has hundreds of thousands of speakers and official status (which I'll talk more about in a second). Breton would rank third, despite a complete lack of support from the French government, just in terms of the number of speakers, and Scottish Gaelic ranks fourth, with less than 100,000 speakers. Manx and Cornish are "revived languages", with probably less than 1000 truly fluent speakers each, most of them adult learners.

Given the focus of the conference, I wanted to give a quick overview of the legal protections that each of these languages enjoys -- I apologize if this is well-known or has already been discussed in an earlier talk.

The [European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages](#) has an especially interesting history in the Celtic world. First, since Irish is enshrined in the constitution of the Republic of Ireland as the "first official language", the Charter hasn't been ratified by the Irish government, despite the language's *de facto* minority status. Ironically enough, the UK *has* ratified the Charter for Irish in Northern Ireland (and also for the so-called "Ulster Scots" language, which is a story much too complicated for me to get into at this point).

The UK also ratified the charter for Welsh in Wales, for Scottish Gaelic in Scotland, and for Cornish in Cornwall. The independent government of the Isle of Man ratified the Charter for Manx Gaelic. Breton is therefore the only Celtic language not enjoying protection under the Charter, since, to this point, France has viewed the Charter as incompatible with the

constitutional status of French as "the language of the Republic".

2. The Official Languages Act in Ireland, and "Language From Below"

In addition to the Charter, parliamentary "Language Acts" have been passed for Irish in the Republic of Ireland (in 2003), for Welsh in Wales (in 1993 and 2011), and for Scottish Gaelic in Scotland (2005). The Irish and Welsh acts are similar in scope; each spells out the duties of public bodies to provide services in the language (the Welsh act going a bit farther in requiring certain *private* entities to provide services as well), and each establishes an office of "Language Commissioner" to investigate complaints regarding non-compliance with the Act.

Here are two photos of the outside of the Post Office in Indreabhán, in the heart of the Conamara Gaeltacht in County Galway in Ireland. The words "Mar a bhí" mean "As it was", and "Mar atá" means "As it is".

In the Irish Language Act, it was declared that only Irish language versions of placenames would have official status in Gaeltacht areas. Nevertheless, sometime in 2010 this sign was placed outside the Post Office in Indreabhán with the English placename "Inverin" (a name no one uses for the place and a terrible anglicisation to boot). Local residents lodged formal complaints with the Language Commissioner, but, two years later, nothing had changed, so as you see in the picture someone took matters into their own hands with a can of black paint.

I don't mean to portray the Official Languages Act as a failure with this small anecdote, since it has proved to be a positive step forward in many ways, and the Commissioner has been able to resolve a number of grievances. I mention it instead to point out the tensions that exist between language policy "from above" (the Act and the structures it established) and agitation for language rights as asserted "from below" (the anonymous painter)[1].

A couple of years ago I had a conversation with Ciarán Ó Cofaigh, a well-known Irish language TV and film producer. After a couple of drinks, I suggested to him that Irish speakers, in contrast with other linguistic minorities around the world, don't appreciate just how good they have it. His response was simple (and this is a loose translation): "everything we have now we have because we fought for it." That answer has stuck with me, and it's clear in retrospect that he's absolutely right.

In 1969, an organization called "Coiste Cearta Sibhialta na Gaeilge" (the Irish Language Civil Rights Committee) was formed in the Conamara Gaeltacht, and was involved in a direct action campaign to secure better services and greater autonomy for Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht. They held marches and public rallies, painted over English-language signs, and established a pirate radio station. Their campaign led directly to the foundation of the first official Irish-language radio service, Raidió na Gaeltachta in 1972, and a bit later Údarás na Gaeltachta, a state agency aimed at economic development in the Gaeltacht areas.

[1] For more on this I recommend Ó Croidheáin, Caoimhghin. *Language From Below: The Irish Language, Ideology and Power in 20th-Century Ireland*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006.

I wanted to a share [a photo from this period](). This is of Máirtín Ó Cadhain, one of the leaders of the civil rights movement in Conamara, speaking at a rally in 1969. Ó Cadhain is best known as a writer, and is widely considered to be the greatest Irish language author of the 20th century. In addition to his fiction writing, he published academic papers, a regular newspaper column, and a number of pamphlets that laid the intellectual foundation for the Gaeltacht Civil RIghts Movement. The legal rights enjoyed by Irish speakers today can be traced directly back to the activism of Ó Cadhain and his contemporaries. A committed socialist, he viewed the language movement and the political movement as one in the same:

> "The Gaelic-speaking population in the Gaeltacht make up the class that is the most abandoned and most oppressed of the Irish people. Their salvation and the salvation of the language are one in the same to me. But this is not possible without the reconquest of Ireland. Ireland and its productive resources to be taken back to the control of the people. To me, the revolution that is necessary for the reconquest is necessary also for the salvation of the Gaelic language. Therefore any action which raises the spirit and enthusiasm of the Gaelic-speaking public is part, and an important part of the reconquest."[2]

In that same year of 1969, across the border in the North, five families built houses together in the Shaw's Road area of Belfast, and committed themselves to using Irish as their normal daily language of communication. Two years later, without government support, they established the first Irish-medium school in Northern Ireland, which still exists today and serves more than 300 pupils. The so-called "Shaw's Road Gaeltacht" has also expanded, from five to a couple dozen families.[3]

These are quintessential examples of language rights being asserted "from below".

3. The Indigenous Tweets Project

I'd like to talk now about how minority language speakers around Europe are doing the same thing, and creating virtual language communities online, through social media websites like Twitter and Facebook.

Social media are particularly well-suited to minority language revitalization. When speaker populations are geographically scattered, or located in remote areas, or when there are large diaspora populations, social media can allow people to connect with each other in a way that was impossible even 5 or 10 years ago.

Just a month or so ago, Facebook published [this piece]() about expat Basque communities using Facebook to reconnect with the language and culture in the Basque Country. It's an article worth reading - it does a nice job situating Facebook at the end of a continuum of technologies

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[2] Ó Cadhain, Máirtín. *Gluaiseacht na Gaeilge - Gluaiseacht ar Strae*. Baile Átha Cliath: Misneach, 1969. Translated by Seósamh Ó Díochan.

[3] Maguire, Gabrielle. *Our Own Language: An Irish Initiative.* Multilingual Matters, 1991.

that diaspora communities have used to "reduce the emotional distance" from the homeland - postal mail, telephone, email, blogs, and now, social media. Equally interesting to me is the fact that, by featuring this piece on their site, Facebook as a company seem to recognize the potential their platform holds for cultural and language preservation.

And given the popularity of Facebook and Twitter among young people, social media are an especially good way of getting that next generation to use their language among friends in a natural way, and hopefully, in turn, pass the language on to their children.

One of the challenges Twitter faces as a business is what we call "discoverability". In other words, how is it possible to surface the content that an individual is going to find most interesting among the many millions of tweets sent every day? This difficulty is compounded in the case of minority languages, since people using smaller languages tend to be "drowned out" by the many tweets in English, French, Spanish, and so on.

To help overcome these challenges, I created a website last year called Indigenous Tweets that searches for everyone using Twitter in an indigenous or minority language around the world. To date, I have found almost 8 million tweets by 46 thousand users in 139 indigenous and minority languages.

For each language, we give a list of up to 500 people tweeting in the language, with statistics on their number of tweets, the percentage of those that are in the language, their number of followers, and so on. These lists are a great way for people to find interesting content and act as a kind of "menu" of accounts to follow in their language.

We also provide "trending topics" per language - Twitter itself only provides trends on a geographical basis, either countrywide, or specific to one or two of the biggest cities in a given country. With this setup, it's virtually impossible for a minority language hashtag or phrase to bubble up and trend on Twitter itself.

Of the 139 languages we support on Indigenous Tweets, 27 of them are European minority languages. These happen to be concentrated near the top of the list of the most active Twitter users, with Basque, Welsh, Frisian, Irish, and Asturian in the top ten.

4. Facebook Translations

Many people view Facebook as an even more powerful platform for language revitalization efforts. It has better support for multimedia, clearer threading of conversations, and no 140 character limit like you have on Twitter. It also has the advantage that nearly everyone already uses it, with now over one billion users.

Facebook's default privacy settings make it almost impossible to create an analogue of the Indigenous Tweets site for Facebook. And really it would be much less useful, since the social dynamics on Facebook are quite different from those on Twitter, with "friendships" being

generally bidirectional, and often coinciding with "real world" friendships, making discoverability less of an issue.

One thing we have been working towards, however, is making the Facebook interface (by that I mean the messages, menus, on so on) available in as many indigenous and minority languages as possible. To their credit, Facebook have developed an innovative platform to allow volunteers to translate the site, and have opened up this platform to about 100 languages, including several minority languages: Irish, Welsh, Basque, Faroese, Frisian, Rumantsch, and Northern Sámi among the European languages. Through the efforts of many dedicated volunteers, you can use Facebook in any of these languages right now.   Unfortunately, Facebook have not allowed any new languages into the system in more than a year, and there are no signs that they will be doing so any time soon.

And it's worth noting that this problem runs deeper than just Facebook. Google had a similar volunteer translation program, and was able to get translations of their search interface into almost 150 languages. But that program has been shut down, for all practical purposes. In the brave new world of "software as a service", big online companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Google have almost total control over the linguistic landscape online. And since these companies aren't subject to the provisions of the ECRML or any of the language acts mentioned above, there's little we can do outside "asking nicely" and hoping they let us translate their sites.

Or is there?

To get around this problem for his own language of Secwepemctsín, my friend Neskie Manuel used a technology called Greasemonkey (which is based on JavaScript) to translate bits of the Facebook interface. These translations are "overlayed" in a user's web browser, and don't rely on the cooperation or approval of Facebook or any other web site. Tragically, Neskie passed away last year not long after starting this project, and I decided to do my best to carry this important work forward. I generalized his code to work with (in theory) any language, and the response has been overwhelming. To date, more than 60 language groups around the world have started translations of the Facebook interface using Neskie's approach, and as a result you can now use Facebook in any of the six Celtic languages (Irish and Welsh being official translations, but now Manx, Cornish, Breton, and Scots Gaelic with our system), along with a number of other European minority languages: Aragonese, Kashubian, Jersey French, Kven Finnish, and Ligurian among others.[4]

Here are some screenshots of these translations into a selection of languages.   The first here is Manx Gaelic, next Breton, next we have Scottish Gaelic, Chichewa (a language spoken in Malawi) and finally K'iche' (a Mayan language of Guatemala).

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[4] For further details on how to get Facebook in your language, see my paper "Translating Facebook into Endangered Languages" from the 16th FEL Conference, or this blog post from the Indigenous Tweets blog.

The Facebook translation project is, to me, another good example of "language from below". Like the pirate radio stations established in the Gaeltacht in 1969, it's not an ideal solution technically, but we hope that the powers-that-be (Facebook and Google in this case), see that there's real demand for their services in many language communities that they are not currently serving.