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Children's language networks in minority language immersion: What goes in may not come out

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Abstract

A central tenet of two-way immersion has been that the minority language children benefit from mother-tongue support in addition to instruction and interaction in the majority language (usually English) with their peers in high-prestige programmes, while the English-speakers gain valuable opportunities for peer interaction in their L2 with native-speakers. Such mixing of L1 and L2 learners of the target language also occurs in minority language immersion programmes. This study presents a qualitative study of L1 minority language children's output in such mixed groups by examining their language networks and use of the target language, Irish¹, in Irish-medium preschools or *naíonraí* where they are interacting with L2 learners of Irish. Such networks are particularly interesting in the informal setting of preschool, where children have more freedom to move around and choose their interlocutor than in formal classrooms. This exploration of the children's output and their language choices raises pertinent questions about the needs of minority language children for direct L1 enrichment. This leads to an examination of aspects of the teachers' input to these minority language children in light of their linguistic needs and the evidence of contact phenomena in their output.

1. Introduction

The best-known model of immersion education involves majority language children learning through the medium of a second language, all beginning as *ab initio* learners of the target language. In a contrasting educational model, known as two-way or dual language immersion, children from two different language backgrounds are grouped in the same class, and varying proportions of time are allocated to teaching through the medium of each of their first languages. Well-implemented two-way immersion programmes that incorporate the language and culture of both language groups involved have been found (Lindholm-Leary 2001) to enhance the self-esteem and motivation of ethnic minority children. Howard, Sugarman and Christian (2003) surveyed research indicating that the academic outcomes of two-way immersion are good for both language minority and language majority pupils, with both groups doing as well as, or

¹ Irish belongs to the Celtic branch (Comprising Scots Gaelic, Welsh, Breton and Irish) of the Indo-European family, and is thought to have been brought to Ireland around 300 BC by the invading Celts. The term 'Irish' is used to refer to the Celtic language spoken in Ireland, to distinguish it from Scots Gaelic.

better than, their peers in other types of educational model. However, they also note a persistent concern in the research literature regarding issues of equity for the two language groups involved. Thus, they acknowledge that programmes struggle to implement the ideals of two-way immersion against the reality of fundamental differences between the languages in status, resources and teacher training, and that these differences inevitably affect the instructional strategies used and the classroom discourse, as well as the attitudes of pupils and their parents to the two languages involved.

A number of studies have looked at the difficulties in promoting use of the minority language among children in two-way immersion. Potowski (2002) noted that English was the language of social interaction among children in the two-way immersion programme she studied in Chicago, with a far lower proportion of utterances in Spanish addressed to peers than to the teacher. Alanis (2000) found evidence of limited progress in Spanish among both the English and the Spanish native speakers in two-way immersion in Texas, and claimed that this was due to their perception that the language of power is English. Howard *et al.* (2003) conclude that 'in study after study [of two-way immersion] the dominance of English was clearly documented' (p.48). This dominance was ascribed to 'the high status of English and native English speakers, the more fully developed bilingualism on the part of the language-minority students, the lack of available pedagogical materials in the minority language, and the dominance of English in the school-wide environment and/or the larger community' (p. 48-49). This poses a significant challenge for two-way immersion with regard to promoting the status of the minority language and native speakers of that language.

Minority language immersion programmes also struggle with the lower status and poorer resources available to minority languages, and in many cases group native speakers with second language learners as a result of the difficulty of making separate provision for the small numbers of L1 speakers of these languages, or because of the belief that separate provision is either unnecessary or undesirable. G. E. Jones (1991) and M.C. Jones (1998) studied such mixed groups in Wales, Hickey (2001) in Ireland, and Mougeon and Beniak (1991, 1994) in Ontario. In these cases the target language of the programme is the minority language only, in an attempt to redress the imbalance in status of that language (Welsh, Irish, French in the above studies) and the majority language (English in each case). In the Canadian context, Mougeon and Beniak (1994) noted that, even when French-medium schools are aimed specifically at francophone children, the English-dominant children of French-speaking parents are entitled to attend, resulting in mixed classes of L1 speakers and L2 learners. In Ireland, there has been such in-migration of English speakers to officially designated Irish-speaking communities (known as *Gaeltachtaí*) that this mixing of L1 Irish speakers with L2 learners of the language starts at pre-school and occurs throughout the school experience.

Settings that involve mixed groups of children from different language backgrounds are described by Thompson (2000) and Feng, Foo, Kretschmer, Prendiville & Elgas (2004) where L1 speakers of the target language (English in both these cases) are grouped in preschool classes with L2 learners from different language backgrounds (Panjabi and Mandarin in these studies). Thompson looked at a group of Mirpur-Panjabi children on their first day in an English-medium nursery and found that they formed close, Panjabi-medium friendship networks. Despite these initial friendships, Thompson

notes (p.194) that, by the end of the first term, none of the bilingual children was observed speaking only Mirapur-Panjabi to other children of the same background.

This points to the difficulty of maintaining minority language networks between children even when they have already been established, given the overwhelming influence of the majority language. Feng *et al.* (2004) looked at three Mandarin-speaking children in a U.S. (English-medium) preschool containing ten other children, six of whom were L1 speakers of English. They found that Mandarin continued to play a central role in these three children's interactions, though they also formed friendships with English-speaking children in the main group. They speculated that a factor in the maintenance of this Mandarin sub-group was the limited English of the boy who was the initiator and sustainer of many of the play sequences with the two bilingual girls. The level of sophistication of the interaction in Mandarin was considerably higher than their interactions in English, and the authors argue that the children gained satisfaction, emotional support, and linguistic stimulation from their Mandarin network. It is not reported how this group fared over a longer period as the LEP child gained in fluency, but the question raised by both these studies is how to maintain children's minority language networks when they are operating in situations of high language contact such as the nursery or preschool, which Thompson (2000) and Hickey (2001) claim is akin to unofficial English submersion.

Given the high levels of language contact between endangered minority languages and majority languages, and given the limited resources that increase the likelihood of classes mixing L1 speakers and L2 learners, it is extremely important to examine, not only the outcome from such groups in terms of L2 learning, but also the networks and patterns of language use in operation between children and between teacher and children. Carrigo (2000) examined the language use of older children in Spanish/English immersion and found that teachers' decisions to group children influenced their output in different ways: while the Spanish-speaking children who were grouped by their home language were more likely to use Spanish, homogenous grouping did not raise English speakers' low use of Spanish. Heterogeneous grouping resulted in a low use of Spanish by both English and Spanish speakers. Hausman-Kelly (2001, cited in Howard *et al.* 2003) found that teachers in the English-Spanish two-way immersion programme studied used seating arrangements and pair assignments to encourage interaction between the two language groups, against a backdrop of declining Spanish use among the Spanish speakers.

Similarly, Hickey (2001) found that Irish L1 children in Irish-medium preschools were influenced by the composition of their group: in groups where L2 learners dominated, minority L1 speakers became less talkative and produced significantly less of the target language (their own L1) than when in groups where bilinguals or Irish L1 children dominated. The English-speaking children, on the other hand, were not influenced by the mix in the group, but maintained a fairly low level of output in the target language regardless of whether they were in groups dominated by L2 learners or L1 speakers of Irish. This highlights the difficulty in maintaining and promoting the use of an endangered minority language in a high-contact situation, even in an immersion programme aimed at promoting that language. One outcome of this contact is the concern that has been expressed in recent years (e.g. Denvir, 1989, Ó hÍfearnáin, 2002) regarding the level of attenuation and mixing in the Irish of young native speakers.

This study offers a qualitative analysis of the output and language networks of several L1 Irish speakers in *naíonraí* or Irish-medium preschools in areas where L1 speakers are mixed with L2 learners. This allows an exploration of the linguistic reality experienced by these children in their use of the target language with child and adult interlocutors. Study of such networks is particularly interesting in the informal setting of preschool, where children have more freedom than in formal classrooms to move around and choose their interlocutor. This consideration of the children's networks raises pertinent questions about the teachers' input to these L1 minority language children in light of their linguistic needs, and the evidence of contact phenomena in their output, and features of the input from teachers are explored and discussed.

2. The position of Irish

Both Irishⁱ and English are official languages of the Republic of Ireland. Figures from Census 2002 show that 1.57 million persons over three years of age (42 per cent of the respondents to that question) were recorded as being 'able to speak Irish'. Of those, however, only 22 per cent (339,541) were reported as speaking Irish on a daily basis, and most of these (77%) were school-goers (aged 5-19 years).

Areas which are officially designated as Irish-speaking (referred to as *Gaeltacht* areas) still exist, mainly on the western seaboard. Ó Riagáin (2001) cites survey evidence showing that since the 1970s there has been an increase in the rate of language shift in the *Gaeltacht*, with a decline in the number of marriages between fluent speakers. The best indicator of home-generated Irish ability is found in the figures for 3-4 year olds in *Gaeltacht* areas, and in Census 2002, 48% of this age group were returned as 'able to speak Irish' but only 37% were reported to speak Irish on a daily basis.

As a result of this variability in language use in the home, children who begin to attend pre-schools (referred to as *naíonraí*) in these areas come from a range of language backgrounds. A survey of *Gaeltacht naíonraí* (Hickey, 1999) found that children from Irish-only homes (L1 Irish speakers) were in the majority in only 20% of *naíonraí* in these areas, while children from English-only homes (L2 learners of Irish) were in the majority in 40% of these groups, the remainder having a majority of children from homes where both Irish and English are spoken. Thus, there is a high level of language contact from a very young age between these two languages of very unequal status.

Ó Riagáin (2001) stresses the need to examine policies that relate to social and education issues in terms of their consequences for language maintenance objectives. Here it will be argued that grouping L1 minority language speakers and L2 learners together without specific language plans, syllabi and methodology in place for their different needs compromises the value of native speaker competence in the minority language and essentially accords it the status of supporting L2 learning. Such prioritising of the needs of L2 learners of the language without due regard for developing and supporting the use of the language among mother-tongue speakers will be shown to be short-sighted and counterproductive.

3. The sample and setting

Hickey (2001, 1999, 1997) details the study of *naíonraí* (Irish-medium pre-schools) nationally and specifically in *Gaeltacht* areas. Nationally, the *naíonraí* operate both in English-speaking communities where they aim to promote the acquisition of Irish as L2, and in officially-designated Irish-speaking (*Gaeltacht*) communities, where they aim to promote the maintenance of Irish as L1 in native speakers as well as its acquisition as L2 by learners. Their other primary aim is to promote children's overall intellectual and social development.

Observation data were collected on 60 children attending *naíonraí* in Irish-speaking communities in the west of Ireland. The children were aged between 3 and 5 years, and each of the 60 target children was observed using the Sylva, Roy and Painter (1980) observational system for two 20 minute sessions as they were engaged in their normal routine in the *naíonra*. In addition, the target children were taped, using a small microphone and a radio transmitter on a fabric belt. Every child in the group wore a fabric belt, with dummy transmitters, so that it was not obvious to the teacher who was the target child at any particular point, and so that the children themselves did not feel conspicuous. The language background of the target children and of all of the other children in their *naíonra* was ascertained from parents' questionnaires and fell into three groups: 'Irish only', 'Irish and English', and 'English only', although all were living in officially designated Irish-speaking communities. The data from the 60 target children were transcribed and analysed using the CHILDES system. Case studies of three children's language networks are presented here, selecting L1 Irish speakers in groups where Irish speakers, English-speakers or children from bilingual homes dominated.

4. Language networks in the *naíonra*

Hamminck (2000) discussed the difference between adults and children regarding code switching, supporting Meisel's (1994:415) conclusion that 'the interlocutor is the most important single factor in the developing language decision system' of young bilinguals, with code-switching in young children even being triggered simply by a person's presence in the room. This has implications for groups containing both minority and majority language children. It is often assumed that children who are proficient in a minority language can have a good influence on L2 learners of that language by promoting its use when working informally together. However, Hickey (2001) and Baker (1997) have noted that when the minority language is in contact with a majority language of high prestige, even when the minority language has official backing as the target language of the group, then speakers tend to shift to the majority language to win peer approval.

The influence of the group composition on language choice was also seen in Moffatt's (1991) study of Panjabi-speaking children in nursery classes in England. Moffatt (1991:60) concluded that the difference in code choice for minority language speakers was not directly attributable to the number of other minority language speakers present, since some children switched to the majority language even when they had several native-speaker peers present. The same phenomenon is evident in the networks presented below. In each case the data from each child are summarised and presented graphically, to illustrate the 'language universe' a particular child experienced during their observation period, and the full complement of their interlocutors. Each speaker's

home language is illustrated by the shading of the circle representing them, and the language the target child spoke to them is illustrated by the shading of the bar linking them.

4.1 Child from Irish-only home in naíonra with majority of children from English-only homes (L2 learners of Irish)

CHI:3^{Ir} was a boy aged 4;4 from an Irish-speaking home. He attended a large (and noisy) *naíonra* of 20 children, with one Leader (*Stiúrthóir*) and her assistant (*ComhStiúrthóir*). This *naíonra* had only two children from Irish-only homes, six from Irish-English homes and twelve children from English-only homes. Figure 1 shows the language network of this boy, CHI:3^{Ir}, detailing what language he spoke to whom during the 40 minutes of observation (two sessions of 20 minutes each on consecutive days). Because of the background noise in this group it was not always possible to identify his interlocutor exactly; analysis in that case used the observer's notes on the group he was with at the time to indicate which child/ren were with him. Black circles in the diagram indicate Irish L1 speakers, while grey circles signify a child from an Irish-English speaking home, and white circles indicate a child from an English-only home. Black bars from CHI:3^{Ir} indicate that he spoke only Irish to one of the adults present (the Assistant Leader), but the white bars in the diagram show that he spoke only English to other children in the group, never once addressing them in Irish, even when speaking to a child from an Irish-English home (CHI:7^{Ir-Eng}). The bar from CHI:3^{Ir} to the Leader is black although he did address her once in English, but because this was self-corrected it was considered to be unintentional. However, while there was one other child who was an L1 Irish speaker of Irish in this *naíonra*, CHI:3^{Ir} never interacted with him during the 40 minutes he was observed; they each simply got on with their own activities and there was no instance of the *Stiúrthóir* encouraging their contact or taking them together to talk to them. This L1 Irish-speaking child was therefore entirely dependent on the two adults in the room for Irish input and interaction, and was not interacting in Irish with his peers at all.

Fig. 1 near here

The network in Figure 1 indicates that this experience offered CHI:3^{Ir} only very limited opportunities for L1 interaction, in the form of 'management language' and snippets of conversation with the busy adults. Because the *naíonra* was quite noisy, there were several examples of requests to repeat to this child. Example 1 presents CHI:3^{Ir} repeating himself when he became interested in the case carrying the transmitter for the radio microphone he was wearing and he initiated this interaction with the Assistant::

1. CHI:3^{Ir} ***Rud éigin istigh *in póca beag.*** Something inside in a little pocket
(wrong form of preposition and omitted initial mutation. Correct: *i bpóca/sa phóca*)
 - Asst. *Caidé a stóir?* What pet?
 - CHI:3^{Ir} ***Rud éigin istigh.*** Something inside
 - Asst. Hmm?

CHI:3^{Ir} *Rud éigin istigh ann.* Something inside in-it

Asst. # *Caidé atá istigh ann?* What is inside in it?

CHI:3^{Ir} *Rud éigin dubh.* Something black

Despite his interest in this object, he got no further than three repetitions and a minimal elaboration, with apparently little real interest shown by the Assistant, before he turned away. Example 2 shows that he remained focused on this item and was more forthcoming to another child (L) who questioned him:

2. CHI:X What's in the pockets? (target-child has radio transmitter in small pocket on belt, others have dummy with box inserted instead of transmitter)

CHI:3^{Ir} em..it's something black

CHI:3^{Ir} **## I don't have any # pocket**

CHI:X Hah? (surprised)

CHI:3^{Ir} **I don't have any pocket**

Here the target-child CHI:3^{Ir} may be misunderstanding the other child's use of 'pocket' – he had not denied he had one when he used the equivalent term in Irish ('póca'), but in the English conversation with the child he comments again on the black object (transmitter) and then goes on to volunteer information, rather than repeating essentially the same phrase as he did with the Assistant (*ComhStiúrthóir*) in the Irish conversation. There was a similarity between Example 1 and a later one with the *Stiúrthóir* (Leader) when she asked what he was about to do:

3. STR: *Caidé atá tusa ag dul a dhéanamh le seo X?*

What are you going to do with this Name?

CHI:3^{Ir} *Déanamh rud éigin.*

Doing something

STR: Hmm?

CHI:3^{Ir} *Ag dul a déanamh rud éigin.*

Going to do something

Again CHI:3^{Ir} appears not to be extending himself in his Irish conversations with the Leaders, offering the same vague statements, which were often of low audibility in the noisy room, and without receiving stimulation either to specify or elaborate. CHI:3^{Ir} appeared a fairly unwilling interlocutor in Irish with his Leaders, whereas he seemed a more animated interlocutor in English with his peers. Overall, it appears that this child's individual interactions in his L1 in the Irish-medium pre-school were not

linguistically stimulating for him, despite evidence from his errors that he was in need of mother-tongue enrichment.

4.2 Child from Irish-Only home in naíonra with majority from Irish-English homes

This was a *naíonra* that comprised three children from Irish-only homes, six from Irish-English homes and one child from an English-only home. Thus, all but one of these children had at least some fluency in Irish. The target child CHI:2^{Ir} was a boy aged 4;7 who was talkative and restless during observation and engaged in a number of conversations with different children. Fig. 2 shows that while CHI:2^{Ir} interacted with a number of children during his observation periods, he almost always spoke to them in English. The grey HATCHED?? bar to the *Stiúrthóir* shows that, while he spoke mainly Irish to her (27 utterances), he also addressed her in English (9 utterances). CHI:2^{Ir} used a small number of Irish utterances to CHI:9^{Ir} (1 utterance), and to CHI:1^{Ir} (6 utterances), the two other children in the *naíonra* from Irish-only homes, but he also addressed them in English, and it is notable that he really had very little to do with these other L1 Irish speakers, and did not seek them out.

INSERT Fig. 2 near here

Example 4 shows that CHI:2^{Ir} was capable of switching back to Irish when he thought that the *Stiúrthóir* was dissatisfied with him (though her annoyance may, in fact, have been for a reason other than his use of English). This example also shows errors in his L1 Irish, indicating his need for L1 enrichment. At the time he wanted to be alone in the home corner, wearing an apron that he claimed was for girls, and it seems to have been this, rather than his use of English which caused the *Stiúrthóir* to show her displeasure:

- 4 CHI:2^{Ir} **All girls go out. I'm in the girls one**
 STR: Hah? (displeased, s attempting to elicit Irish or rejecting statement)
 CHI:2^{Ir} *Seo # *cailíní ceann.* This is *girls (pl) one
 (correct: *seo ceann na gcailíní* (this is the girls' one))
 STR: *Ní hea, mar a chéile iad ar fad* No, they are all the same
 (Objecting to his disparagement of an item as 'a girls' one')

Perhaps because he depended on the *Stiúrthóir* for Irish conversation, CHI:2^{Ir} could be demanding, frequently shouting her name, and looking for her attention in a range of ways. One interaction showed him initiating a conversation with her, and attempting to keep her talking to him:

- 5 CHI:2^{Ir} *Stiúrthóir tá mo shúil tinn.* Leader my eye is sore
 STR: *Cad atá ar do shúil?* What's wrong with your eye?
 CHI:2^{Ir} *Níl a fhios agam* I don't know
 STR: *B'fhéidir gaineamh a <shil> [?] isteach ann, an bhfuil?*

Maybe sand went into it, did it?

CHI:2^{Ir} **Yeah.**

STR: *Yeah, nuair a bhíonn tú ag caitheamh gaineamh timpeall
sin a tharlaíonn nach é?*

Yeah when you are throwing sand around that's what happens, isn't it?

STR: *An-bhuachaill Ainm, # buachaill maith.*

Great boy Name, good boy (to another child)

CHI:X ***Stiúrthóir !*** [another child calling her from other side of room]

STR: *Cá bhfuil sé? Where is he?*
(to other children, trying to find child who is calling her)

CHI:2^{Ir} **xx.**

STR: *Now suigh síos <xx> [>]* Now sit down (dismissing CHI:2^{Ir})

CHI:2^{Ir} *<xxx> Áine istigh sa xx nóistíl [?][= ospidéal].*

Aine (relative) inside in the xxx *hopsital

STR: *An bhfuil? Is that so? (Turning back to him)*

CHI:2^{Ir}: *Tá cos tinn aici* She has a sore leg

STR: *Nós Orla? Like Orla?*

CHI:2^{Ir} **No**

CHI:X No, like Aoife (another child who has been listening chimes in)

STR: *Ar nós Aoife!*
Like Aoife! (STR is clearly surprised)

CHI:5: And remember what happened to xxx (another child joining in)

STR: *Tá Áine san ospidéal*
Áine is in hospital (turning to tell others)

STR: *Téann sé isteach chun í a fheiceáil*
He goes in to see her
(CHI:2^{Ir} turns to jigsaw and starts to sing to himself)

It was clear that the target child CHI:2^{Ir} here was trying to engage the *Stiúrthóir* in conversation, first by complaining about his eye hurting, knowing she would have to attend to that, and then at the point where she dismissed him, trying to prolong that conversation by talking about the illness of his relative, someone she knew. However, other children then joined in this conversation, speaking in English, and the *Stiúrthóir* tried to include them and to offer them glosses in Irish. At this point CHI:2^{Ir} seemed to lose interest, seeing that his conversation had been commandeered by the others, and he turned back to his jigsaw.

Clearly, balancing the competing demands of a group of preschool children is an extremely difficult task, but here it is made even more difficult because of their different levels of language competence, which can cause a fluent child to lose interest when the same information is repeated or adapted for language learners. While CHI:2^{Ir}'s data show him to have been demanding of adult attention, he usually did not manage to hold it for long enough to gain much in terms of language stimulation.

4.3 Child from Irish-only home in naíonra with majority from Irish-only homes

This *naíonra* had six children from Irish-only homes, three from Irish-English homes and just one from an English-only home. Thus, all but one child had at least some fluency in Irish. The target child CHI:1^{Ir} was a girl aged 4;5, who during observation played with dolls, listened to a story and sang rhymes and songs, speaking fairly infrequently. Despite the fact that this group had six fluent Irish speakers in it, Fig. 3 shows that this child spoke mainly English to other children, and a mixture of English and Irish to the *Stiúrthóir*.

INSERT Fig. 3 near here

CHI:1^{Ir} spoke rarely, and then only in English, to two other L1 Irish speakers (CHI:5^{Ir} and CHI:4^{Ir}) and to a child from a bilingual home (CHI:6^{Ir-Eng}). In speaking to other children who could not be identified in the group, she spoke English in all but two of her utterances, and even addressed the *Stiúrthóir* in English at times. Example 6 shows that her Irish was restricted and inaccurate in this conversation where she wants to be allowed to play with the water or paint:

- 6 **CHI:1^{Ir}** *Cead agamsa uisce?* (Permission at-me water) Can I [have] water?
CHI:1^{Ir} *Máistreás cead agamsa uisce?*
Mistress, [have] I permission [to have] water
STR: *No níl, xx cailín maith.* No you don't, good girl (end of interaction)
CHIX: *Tá mise ag iarraidh péinteáil.* I want to paint (to STR)
CHI:X *Cead agam dul ag péinteáil?* Can I go and paint? (to STR)
CHI:1^{Ir} **But don't let any xx.**
CHI:X: *Ainm!* (*calling name*)
CHI:X *Name 's going painting.*
CHI:1^{Ir} **Name! Name 's going painting.** (displeased)
CHI:X *Name 's going xx* (loudly).
CHI:1^{Ir} **Name 's going painting!**
CHI:1^{Ir} *Tusa? You?(to unidentified child)*
CHI:X *You keep xx.*
CHI:1^{Ir} **Oh yeah I xx [love?] painting.**
CHI:1^{Ir} *Máistín@ ní raibh ag péinteáil* *Mistress, *wasn't painting.

STR: *Ní raibh tusa ag péinteáil inné an raibh?*

You weren't painting yesterday were you?

CHI:1^{Ir} No

In this exchange, the target child CHI:1^{Ir} uses English directly to other children, even when they have just spoken Irish, but switches to restricted and inaccurate Irish for the *Stiúrthóir*. Her Irish utterances here appear more like the elliptic utterances of L2 learners than the requests of a native speaker. The only clear example of her speaking Irish deliberately to other children was when she adopted the role of teacher and addressed the group as follows:

7. STR: *Now suígí síos i gcomhair lóin anois leanaí, ,*

Now sit (plural) down for lunch now children

xx suas faigh ceann eile, cailín maith

xx up, get another one good girl (to children in dispute over chair)

CHI:1^{Ir} **SOCRAIGH SÍOS!* (shouting) Settle down *(singular imperative)

STR: *Anois, cailín maith* Now, good girl

(attempting to tone down her shouting)

This shows that the child was aware that the role of the *Stiúrthóir* required Irish, the official language of the *naíonra*, and she therefore saw Irish as the appropriate choice when trying to manage the other children, but there was no evidence that she perceived Irish as a normal mode of communication with her peers. Neither was there evidence during the 40 minutes when CHI:1^{Ir} was being observed of her being offered any language specifically directed at her language needs, except perhaps instances of the gloss in Example 6 above when the *Stiúrthóir* asked a question which was based on the child's earlier subject-less utterance.

5. Language enrichment for young minority language speakers

vs. simplification in input for language learners

Corson (1993) has commented that ancestral minority language children may arrive in school with relatively underdeveloped first language skills in certain styles, contexts and functions of use. Baker and Jones (1998) noted that preschool minority language children are very vulnerable to the status of English which surrounds them, and tend to shift to English quickly. Influences on the children's L1 have also been observed, and Mougeon, Nadasdi and Rehner (2005) have examined innovations observed in the French of Canadian Francophones which are the result of language contact. Mougeon and Beniak (1994, 1991) looked at attenuation and shift among these young Francophones in Canada and argued the need for institutional support for the minority language L1 speakers. Some of the Irish utterances of the three children whose networks were described above show vocabulary gaps, errors and restricted use of the language that would indicate that these young native speakers of a minority language are in need of the kind of language enrichment that is advocated for majority language children from disadvantaged homes.

At a National Forum on Early Education in Ireland organised by the Department of Education and Science in 1998, *Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta* (the Organisation of *Gaeltacht* Schools) noted in their submission that they are particularly concerned about Irish L1 children in classes with L2 learners of the language because of the pressure of English and the lack of a syllabus, support or language plan to serve the special needs of these young L1 speakers.

Regarding special provision, Hickey & Ó Cainín (2001) examined the response of the ten *Stiúrthóirí* of the 60 target children when asked if they offered any language enrichment activities to L1 speakers. All but one of these Leaders reported that they never grouped L1 speakers together or offered them more linguistically demanding tasks, citing reasons such as the impracticality of devoting time to native speakers when dealing with a large group with insufficient personnel, or the belief that this would be unfair to the L2 learners whose needs they perceived to be greater. More disturbingly still, some stated that making provision for the language needs of the Irish L1 children would be contrary to their understanding of the principle of child-centeredness, apparently in the belief that being child-centred means offering the same treatment to every child, despite their having different needs. Some of the concerns and challenges raised by the *Stiúrthóirí* were similar to those reported in a study of the views of teachers in two-way immersion by Howard and Loeb (1998), particularly the concern with promoting target language use among all the children and meeting the needs of the second language learners, without specific reference to maintaining and promoting the minority language among the L1 speakers.

It would appear from the responses of the *Stiúrthóirí* that L1 Irish speakers are mainly offered the type of input that is aimed at L2 learners. Valdés (1997) cautioned that the modification of input to make it comprehensible for L2 learners in two-way immersion could have a negative effect on the L1 of young minority language children. Ramirez and Merino (1989) and Mougeon and Beniak (1994) looked at classes containing L1 minority language speakers with L2 learners and found that teachers tended to adapt their language for the learners, ask fewer questions, give less feedback and model more for repetition than when addressing only L1 speakers.

Examination of the input from *Stiúrthóirí* in the *naíonra* indicates consistent attempts to simplify Irish input to make it accessible for L2 learners. There was a tendency to focus on helping L2 learners to acquire basic phrases to ask permission and indicate preference, and basic body, colour and shape terms, as well as counting and the days of the week. Example 8 shows a discussion initiated by the *Stiúrthóir* about the number of children absent, with the Assistant (*Comh-Stiúrthóir* referred to as CSR) initially using the correct Irish numbering for people (*triúr* ‘three-people’), followed by counting on her fingers using the number (*trí*) used to count non-people in Irish. However, the attempt to link the three absent children to the type of counting likely to be familiar to the L2 learners may have misled CHI:3^{tr}, the Irish L1 child, to focus on the number three (*trí*), rather than on the appropriate form for three people (*triúr*):

- | | |
|--------|---|
| 8.STR: | <i>Cé mhéad as láthair?</i> How many are missing? |
| CHI:X | em. |
| STR | Name, Name, Name. (Naming 3 children) |
| CSR | <i>Tá # triúr as láthair.</i> There are three [people] absent |

CSR	<i>A haon # dó # trí.</i>	One two three (counting on her fingers)
CHI:3 ^{Ir}	<i>Trí.</i>	Three (using number term for items)
CSR	<i>Tá triúr as láthair.</i>	There are three [people] absent
CHI:3 ^{Ir}	<i>Trí</i> (Number)	Three

Example 9 presents a conversation about colours, with the *Stiúrthóir* and the *ComhStiúrthóir* (Assistant) trying to get the children to give the names of the basic colours. So focussed are they on managing the attention of the group and on eliciting primary colour terms that when this target child (referred to as TC) from an Irish-only home uses an English word for a more unusual colour this is accepted without offering the Irish term. This example gives a flavour of the language used in managing the group and its modification for L2 learners, and the omission of certain features of Irish grammar is noted in bold in the adult data.

9. STR: *Cén dath atá ar *geansaí xx ag X?* What colour is X's jumper?
(no lenition on noun following preposition)
- STR: **Ainm ná bí ag xxx, ná bí ag xx mar beidh muid ag iarraidh, [/]*
Beidh muid ag iarraidh a bheith ag éisteacht, tá sin magic xx.
 Name don't be xx don't be xxx because we will be trying
 we will be trying to be listening, that's magic
(no Vocative marking on name)
- STR: *Anois fan go bhfeicfidh tú anois.* Now wait till you see now
*Cén dath atá ar *geansaí *Ainm?* What colour is Name's jumper?
(no lenition on noun after preposition and no genitive on name)
- STR: *Anois! Now* (warning, trying to get the child's attention)
- CHI:X *Bán.* White
- CSR: *Anois! Now!* (warning, looking at a child who is not listening).
- CHI:X *Dearg.* Red
- CSR: *Bándearg!* Pink! (white-red, supplying correct term)
- CHI:X *Bándearg* Pink
- STR: *xx ar bríste atá ar *Seán?* xx on Seán's trousers?
(no lenition on name after preposition)
- CHI:X *Bán* White
- CHI:X *Glas.* Green
- STR: *Glas, an dath atá ar do xx* Green, the colour of your xxx.
- CHI:X *Glas* Green
- CSR: *Agus bróga *bán, bróga *bán and *white(sg) shoes * white shoes*
(no plural marking on adjective)
agus tá ribín uirthi, tá And she has a ribbon on her, she has.
- TC: ***Agus tá purple air*** **And it is purple**
- CSR: *Cinéal purple sea* *Sort of purple, yes*
- CHI:X I got xx socks.
- STR: *ó tá xx deasa. nice xxx* (TC Code: 5222CD)

This L1 Irish-speaker (TC, target-child in this example) would have benefited from hearing the Irish term *corcra* 'purple' in the context in which she needed it, and from

opportunities to go beyond naming primary colours. Instead, the input in this interaction seemed to focus on extracting and reinforcing a few central colour terms, with simplification on nouns and adjectives and avoidance of initial mutations, and when the L1 speaker did make a contribution it was not extended or glossed in a way appropriate to her needs.

Another example showed a different response from a child from an Irish-only home when the *Stiúrthóir* was again attempting to reinforce colour terms to some children in the group while looking at a book with them.

10 STR:	<i>X, na dathanna, féach</i>	Child's-Name, the colours, look
STR:	<i>Seo?</i>	Here?
CHI:X:	<i>Gorm</i>	Blue (unidentified child)
CHI:X	<i>Dearg</i>	Red
STR:	<i>X, cén dath é seo?</i>	Name, what colour is this?
CHI:X	<i>Dearg!</i>	Red
STR:	<i>Sin buataisí dearg*</i>	That's *red(sg) boots
TC:	<i>Tá ceann agamsa!</i>	I have one (TC Code 518G)

(getting the same book for herself, wanting *Stiúrthóir* to look at that with her)

Here, the target-child responds to another colour-term session by trying to engineer a book-reading experience focused on herself, rather than joining in to the group listing off colour words. Again, in an effort to maintain the stability of these terms which are new to the L2 learners, the *Stiúrthóir* models inaccurate use of the singular adjective with a plural noun to the Irish-dominant child in the group.

These examples show interesting features of the input directed at L2 learners but also offered to the Irish L1 children. Generally, they can be understood as attempts to keep the input simple and consistent at a time when the L2 learners are trying to construct a basic vocabulary. Nevertheless, the result is that the children who are native speakers of Irish are receiving input from their Leaders that is attenuated and/or inaccurate in the following ways:

1. The *Stiúrthóirí* generally avoided the initial mutations required on the names of the children in the Vocative or Genitive cases. This may be because it was thought that L2 learners would not then recognise their names when the first phoneme is altered by the initial mutation involved. The decline in the Vocative case among young speakers of the language has been noted elsewhere (Hickey, 2006), but it is possible that they are reflecting input geared at L2 learners of the language grouped with them.
2. The *Stiúrthóirí* often avoided initial mutations on nouns and marking the adjective for plural, possibly in an attempt to present stable forms to L2 learners
3. The very limited 'anois' and its English equivalent 'now' are used alone repeatedly to draw the attention of the children to the *Stiúrthóir* and as admonishments to keep

them under control, instead of more complex imperatives (which require plural marking) which would offer more language to L1 children.

4. There was a tendency to ask questions designed to elicit one-word replies, which restricted the scope of L1 children to formulate more extended responses. This is likely to seem unstimulating to L1 children.

Stiúrthóirí undoubtedly wish to nurture children's self-esteem by accepting their statements, but they are not supporting the children's L1 if they do not offer them normal levels of accuracy, present opportunities for more stimulating linguistic interactions, or supply them with the Irish term for English mixes. This may, in fact, lead the children to understand that the inaccurate language they hear modelled by their teachers is superior to the normal use of the language at home. The L1 speakers' output showed them to have Irish vocabulary gaps (not always accurately filled by English words), errors in subject-verb agreement, genitive and vocative marking and in the initial mutation system. More generally, their Irish output appeared restricted, which may be due to limited opportunities to converse with other fluent speakers, either adults or children.

6. Discussion

The language networks presented here point to significant cause for concern about the future of this minority language. If preschool children who are native speakers of the language choose the majority language as the default means of communication with their peers even when in an Irish-speaking context such as the *naíonra*, and with other native speaker children, then it is difficult to see how to get them to speak the language informally with other children outside of educational institutions. Clearly, just being part of an institution set up to promote the acquisition of the minority language is not enough to counteract the influence of English. The long-term aim of increasing *use* of Irish by these children in school and community appears to be subordinated to the short-term aim of promoting L2 acquisition among learners.

A similar situation is seen in Ontario, Canada, where English-dominant children of French-mother-tongue parents are entitled to attend French-medium schools set up to cater for francophones. Mougeon & Beniak (1994) reported that many such schools separate English-dominant pupils from French-dominant pupils for at least the early years of elementary schooling. Other schools provide intensive French for the English-dominant pupils. Such separation is not always an option in Irish-speaking communities, where the numbers of children are too low to support separate groups. However, it has been attempted in recent years in at least two *Gaeltacht naíonraí* that now offer a separate session only for Irish L1 children, and another for Irish L2 children. This separation generated some local controversy initially, mainly from those who considered the move elitist, but now appears to be accepted. Observation of one such Irish L1 *naíonra* showed far more frequent use of Irish by the children in addressing each other as well as the adults present, and the Irish input to them appeared to be more challenging. However, where separate groups are not possible, some targeting of the L1 children could still be achieved in mixed groups if the Irish L1 children were grouped together for some activities during the normal day, as

recommended by Baker and Jones (1998). Once these children's needs are acknowledged then much could be achieved (even without complete separation) to help establish the normality of children speaking Irish to each other. In this regard it is noteworthy that Montague and Meza-Zaragosa (1999) raised concerns about some interventions to elicit minority language use, and it appears likely to be more beneficial to address the needs of different groups of children through different activities than to adopt a 'one size fits all' strategy to elicit the target language.

Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000) point to the importance of providing a supportive context for the language minority child to develop their language skills in early years' education, in order to prevent marginalisation and low self-esteem. An adequate response to L1 minority language speakers' needs requires the development of appropriate teacher training, curricula and work organisation, as well as the resourcing of extra personnel to allow regular grouping by language ability. A significant step has been taken in recent years in offering in-service training in language enrichment in Irish as L1 and in sociolinguistics to *Stiúrthóirí*, but there is a need to continue to raise awareness of the urgency of addressing these children's needs. It would be desirable to initiate an examination of the kind of communities represented by these *naíonraí* among *Stiúrthóirí* (and also among teachers in the primary schools such children progress to). Toohey's (1996) analysis of the ways that the social structures in the group are organised would also be relevant here. Carrigo (2000), Lindholm-Leary (2001) and Amrein and Peña (2000) noted a tendency for the Spanish-speaking children in two-way immersion groups to want to be in groups together, and the need of minority children for mutual support and linguistic stimulation should not be sacrificed in order to promote integration with the majority groups. Feng *et al.* (2004) noted that the Mandarin sub-group in their preschool gained a great deal of emotional support and linguistic stimulation from their Mandarin play which was not evident in their far more limited English-medium play.

Feng *et al.* (2004) raise two questions based on their research: how can we promote the emotional well-being of a child who is the only (child) speaker of a different language, and how do we organise a classroom in a way that encourages interactions in a language other than English? While posed regarding a very different sociolinguistic context, both these questions are highly relevant to the *naíonra* context also, but they cannot be addressed until the very real linguistic needs of the Irish L1 children are recognised. Interviews with the *Stiúrthóirí* indicated a tendency to view the Irish L1 children as 'linguistic carriers' of the target language, rather than as possibly restricted users of an attenuated minority language with their own valid language needs. This lies behind the practice reported by a group of *Gaeltacht Stiúrthóirí* that they postponed storytelling or reading from books for the whole group of children until the third term when they judged the L2 learners to have sufficient language to deal with the task.

Partnership with parents is crucial in addressing the needs of the pre-school L1 children. These parents have already achieved intergenerational transfer by using the minority language as the language of the home and much could be gained by listening to their concerns and suggestions. These parents might also be willing to help by offering a small group of Irish L1 children a language-enrichment activity (story, drama, art, game) on a regular basis. Parents also need practical advice and support from

Stiúrthóirí on ways of continuing to promote their children's L1 acquisition through book-reading, rhymes, songs and language games.

The short-term aim of providing happy and effective experiences of Irish-medium pre-schooling needs to be linked more explicitly with the long-term goal of consolidating the *use* of Irish as a community language. There is a need for intervention to ensure that attempts to enlarge the pool of L2 learners of Irish is not at the cost of the L1 speakers who need active language enrichment. Just as educators of the gifted argue that it is not, in fact, elitist but fair that children of exceptional ability be provided with differentiated learning opportunities rather than being left to 'get on with it themselves' or used as teaching assistants for their peers, so too L1 speakers of a minority language need an appropriate curriculum, differentiated language plans, and some periods at least when they are deliberately grouped together to provide support and enrichment for that language, as some protection from the overwhelming tide of the majority language which washes up even into their homes. Dispersing the speakers of a minority language among majority language speakers without due regard for their mother-tongue development achieves neither the short term goal of helping L2 learners nor the long-term goal of creating a community of speakers of the language. Instead, as the language networks of these L1 speakers of Irish show in terms of use of the minority language, it gives us only the sound of one hand clapping.

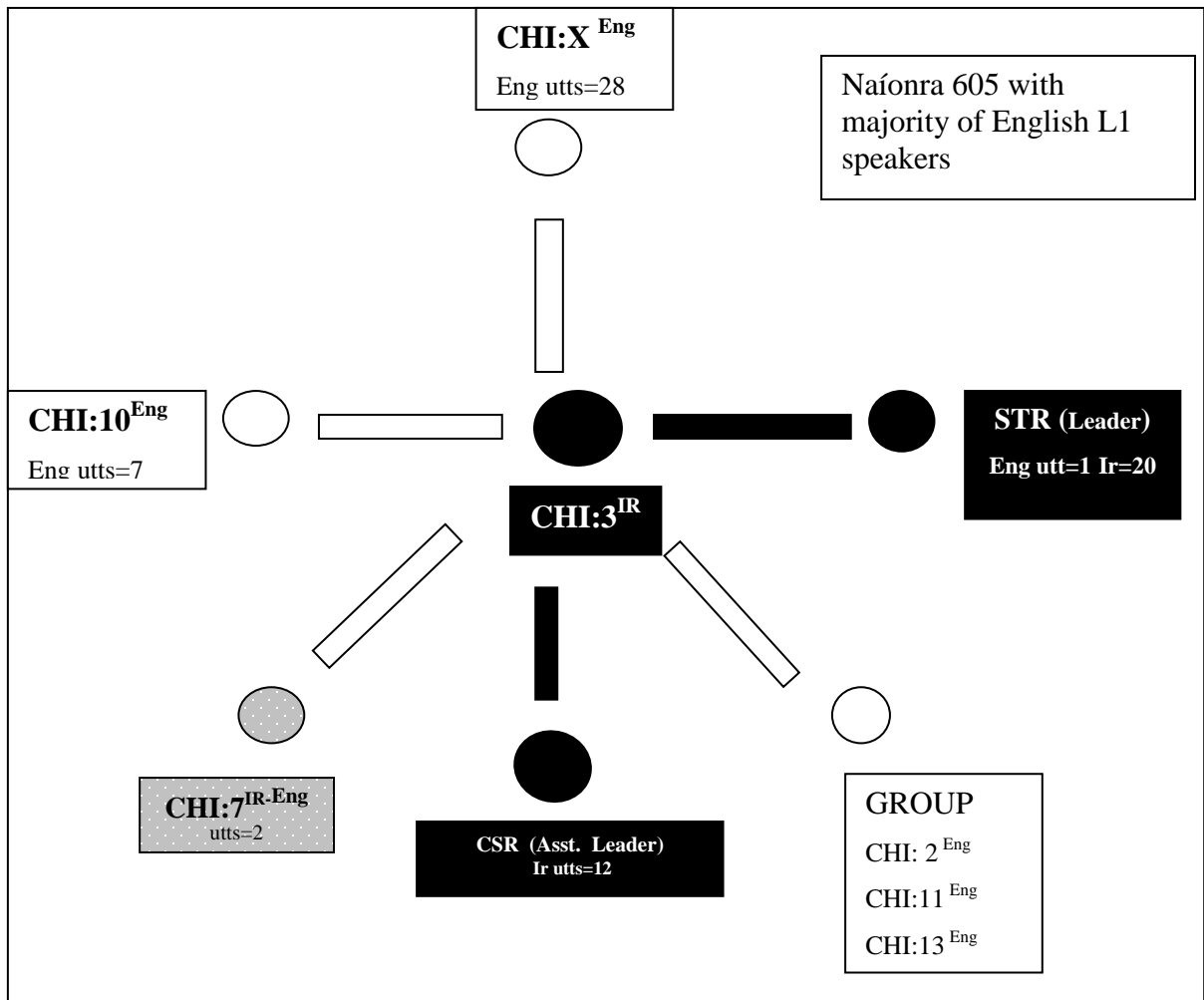
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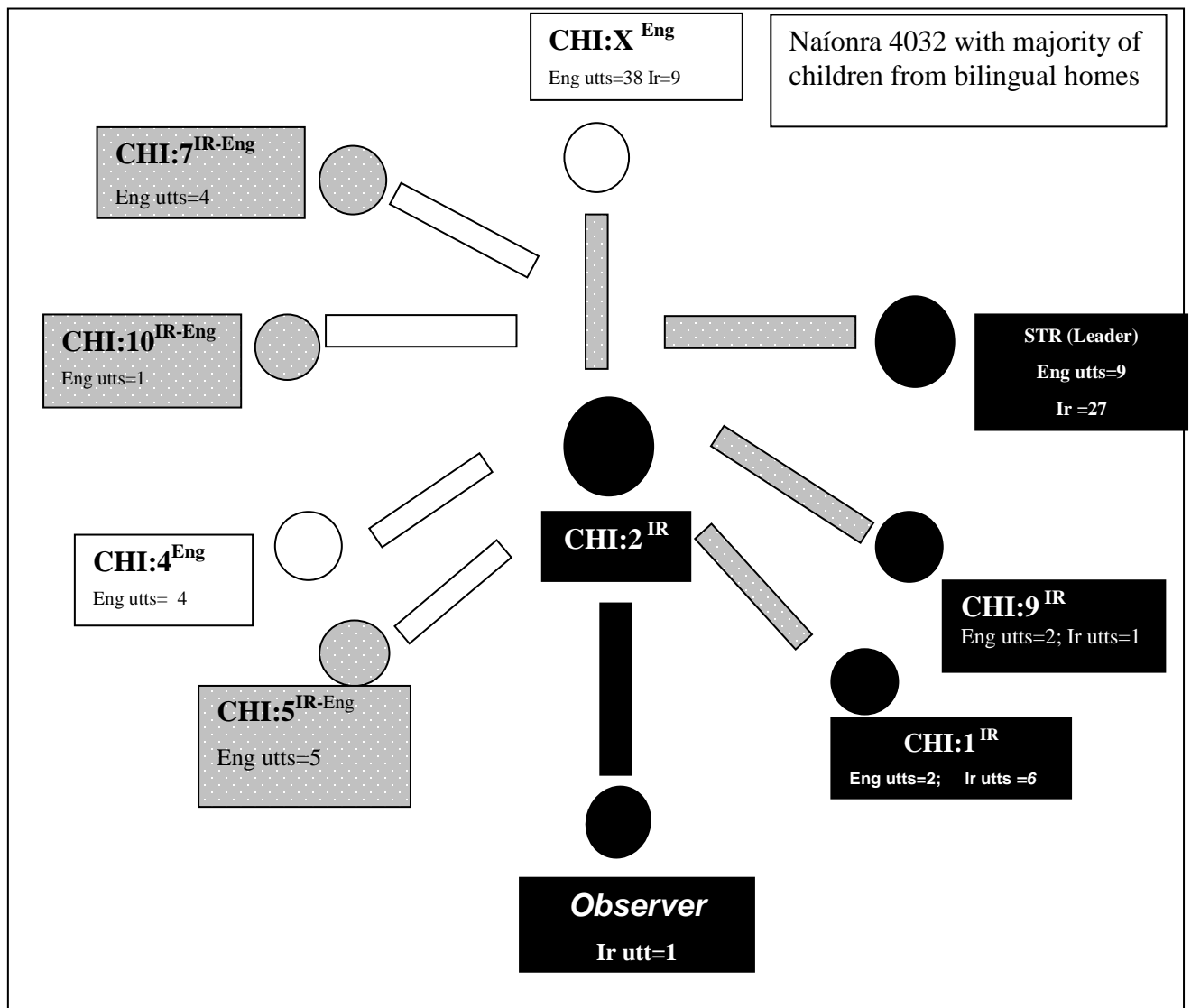
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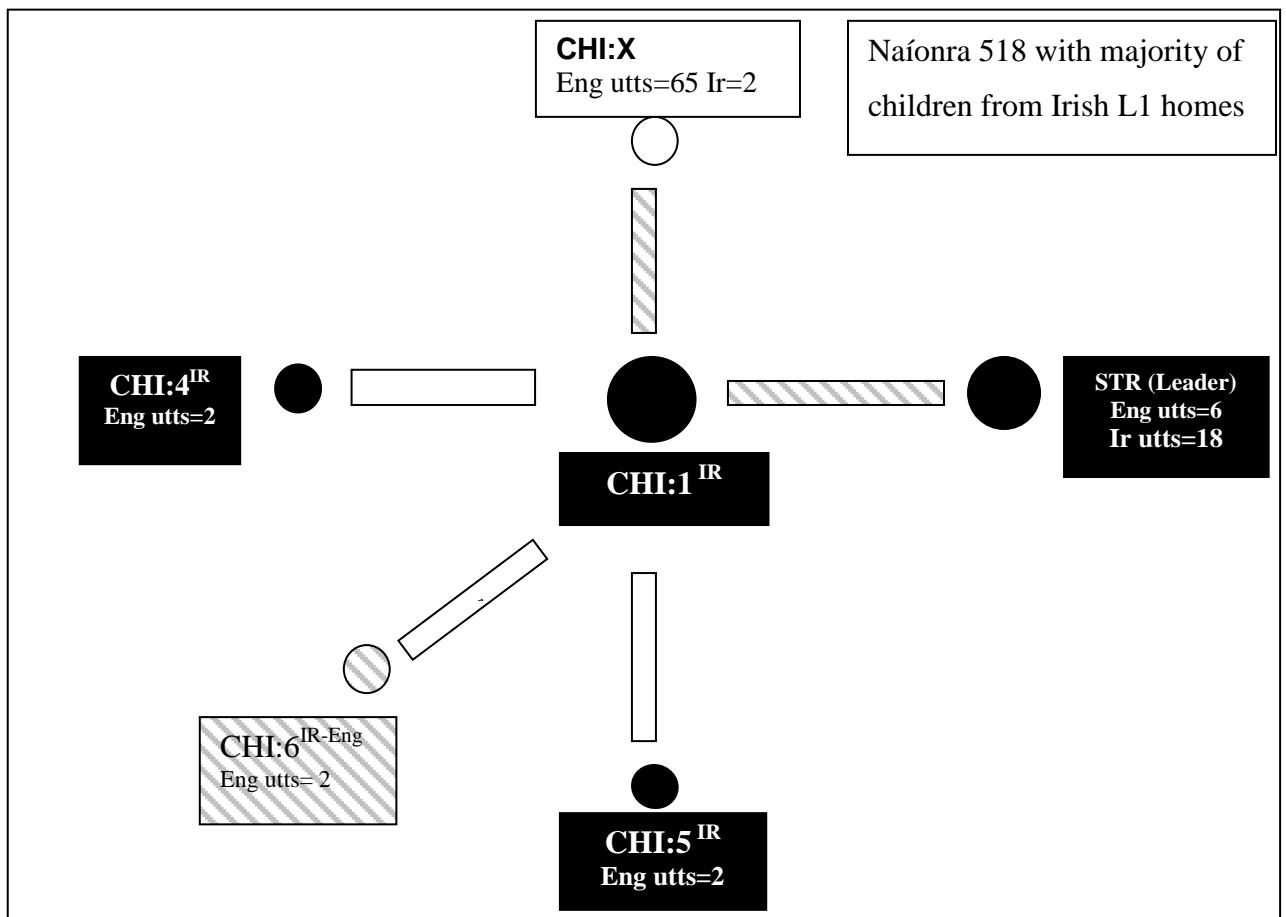
Black circle=Irish L1 speaker; Grey circle=Child from Irish-English home; White circle=child from English-only home; Black bar =>target-child spoke **Irish only** to that interlocutor; White bars =>target child spoke **only English** to that interlocutor

Fig 1. Network of CHI:3^{IR}, an Irish L1 speaker, in a *naíonra* with a majority of Irish L2 learners



Back circle=Irish L1 speaker; Grey circle=Child from Irish-English home; White circle=child from English-only home; Black bar =>target-child spoke **Irish only** to that interlocutor; Grey bar => target child spoke both Irish and English to that interlocutor; White bars =>target child spoke **only English** to that interlocutor

Fig 2 Network of CHI:2^{IR} an Irish L1 speaker in a *naíonra* with majority of children from bilingual homes



Black circle=Irish L1 speaker; Grey circle=Child from Irish-English home; White circle=child from English-only home; Black bar =>target-child spoke **Irish only** to that interlocutor; Grey bar => target child spoke both Irish and English to that interlocutor; White bars =>target child spoke **only English** to that interlocutor

Fig 3 Network of CHI:1^{IR} an Irish L1 speaker in a *naíonra* with majority of Irish L1 speakers

ⁱ Irish belongs to the Celtic branch (comprising Irish, Scots Gaelic, Welsh and Breton) of the Indo-European family, and is thought to have been brought to Ireland around 300 BC by the invading Gaels. The term 'Irish' is used to refer to the Celtic language spoken in Ireland, to distinguish it from Scots Gaelic.