

Is there an Educational Advantage to speaking Irish? An investigation of the relationship between education and ability to speak Irish¹

Short title: Is there an Educational Advantage to speaking Irish?

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Abstract

In this article new findings are outlined that show a relationship between ability to speak Irish and level of education. The authors' statistical analysis of International Social Survey Programme data from a survey in 2003 on national identity reveals that Irish speakers have been more likely than non Irish speakers to attend university (or equivalent). This likelihood is strongest amongst people who were born in the 1950s and 1960s, and more particularly amongst women rather than men of this age group. This is not the case amongst the youngest age group, perhaps because of developments in the education system and in the economy. The findings are placed in the context of the political use made of both the Irish language and the education system in Ireland historically and more recently. The effect on the Irish language of changes in education, as well as the role of the Irish language as cultural capital and symbolic capital are discussed.

¹ Iarfhlaith Watson would like to acknowledge his gratitude to Prof. Dr Hermann Schwengel for his invitation to the Institut für Soziologie in Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg where he was while writing this article. Both authors would like to acknowledge the invaluable comments of Prof. Nancy Dorian.

1. Introduction

Today the Irish language is spoken well by one in six people in the Republic of Ireland (International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) data 2003). Curiously, almost three times that many claim to be able to speak Irish (Census, 2002 and 2006). The education system plays a role in producing Irish speakers because Irish has been a compulsory subject at school, with most people taught Irish for up to fourteen years. Since the 1970s some of the compulsory elements of Irish-language education policy have been relaxed. Remarkably, also since the 1970s, the number of people claiming (in censuses) to be able to speak Irish has doubled. Not coincidentally, free secondary¹ education was introduced in the 1960s and this resulted in more people remaining in education for a longer period of time. As a result of compulsory Irish at school, and the increasing length of years spent in education, the majority of Irish people still see Irish primarily as a school subject. There is, however, another interesting association between Irish and education: people who were born in the decades before 1970 and claim to be able to speak Irish well have higher levels of education than those who do not claim to speak Irish well (ISSP data 2003).

The situation was quite the opposite under British rule before the twentieth century. For several centuries the British state opposed the Irish language. The result was that by the late nineteenth century Irish was spoken only in the poorest and remotest parts of Ireland. Even in those remote places in the nineteenth century the national education system worked against the Irish language. As a result, the Irish language was associated with poverty and ignorance. However, in the late nineteenth century the nationalist movement for independence from Britain promoted the Irish language as an element of Irish national identity. Following independence in 1922, the Irish state promoted the Irish language.

2. The Irish language

Today the Irish language is an official language in Ireland but it is a minority language, because English is the *lingua franca*. Although several hundred years ago Irish was the language of most people in Ireland, it has been in continuous decline since the seventeenth century. Even as early as the 1270s the colonial king was told (in Latin) that Irish speakers were against him (“*Hybernica lingua vobis et vestris sit inimica*” quoted in Watt 1987: 346). Over the centuries there were various legal efforts made against the Irish language. Up until the seventeenth century it was essentially a defensive effort because many of the English speakers in Ireland adopted the Irish language and customs. They became more Irish than the Irish (“*hiberniores hibernis ipsos*” was a common Latin phrase used at the time). From the sixteenth century onwards there was a confused policy about whether or not to use the Irish language to convert the Irish-speaking Catholic population of Ireland to Protestantism. On the one hand the New Testament was translated into Irish (printed in 1602) and, apparently, one of the duties of Trinity College Dublin² had been to train Irish-speaking protestant clergy (Crowley 2005). On the other hand there was legislation such as the “Act for the English Order, Habit and Language” (1537) to discriminate against the Irish language. The final defeat of the Gaelic lords at the start of the seventeenth century marks the beginning of the decline of the Irish language. The political and economic structure was completely altered and English became the language of politics and commerce.

About a third of the way through the eighteenth century it was estimated that about two-thirds of the population of Ireland used Irish as their everyday language.³ According to the estimate of the nineteenth-century legal scholar Whitley Stokes, about half the population spoke Irish as their language of choice and 800,000 were

monoglot Irish speakers (Crowley 2005). During the nineteenth century the percentage of Irish speakers continued to decline, while the population of Ireland continued to increase until it reached 8,000,000 before the Great Famine⁴ of the 1840s. The Famine and subsequent emigration hit the Irish-speaking population hardest, because by this time the Irish language was most common in the poorest and remotest parts of Ireland.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In the first census following the Famine about a quarter of the population was recorded as Irish speakers (1,524,285 people). In the decades following the Famine the number of Irish speakers declined rapidly so that by 1911 there were only 553,717 (17.6 per cent) Irish speakers left in Ireland (see Fig. 1). It was during this period of rapid decline that an Irish-language movement began, which promoted the use of Irish. Some of the members of this movement were also members of the nationalist movement for political independence from Britain. Whereas in previous centuries the effort was to replace the Irish language with the English language because Irish was seen to be a threat, from the 1840s onwards there was a movement to revive the Irish language because it was regarded as a symbol of Irish national identity. These efforts were institutionalized by the state after independence in 1922.

Although the Irish language came to be regarded as a symbol of the Irish nation, it was largely spoken natively only in certain communities called “the Gaeltacht”. Despite the relative success of the Irish state, from 1922 to the present, in producing new Irish speakers, the Gaeltacht continued to decline and came to represent the fate of the Irish language as a whole. As mentioned above, it was estimated that by about 1800 there were around 800,000 monoglot Irish speakers. This had dropped to

319,602 (4.9 per cent) by the mid-century and even further to 16,873 (2.9 per cent) by early in the twentieth century (Crowley 2005). Today there are no monoglot Irish speakers;⁵ the Gaeltacht communities (found mainly in the West of Ireland), however, contain 64,265 Irish speakers (who can also speak English) (Census 2006). There are also non Irish speakers living within the boundaries of the Gaeltacht, resulting in the continuing decline in the percentage of Irish speakers from 82.9 per cent in 1971 to 77.4 per cent in 1981 (Fishman 1991) and from 76.3 in 1996 to 70.8 per cent in 2006 (Census 2006).

Although the continuing decline of the Gaeltacht has been regarded as a symbol of the decline of the Irish language generally, there was, nonetheless, an increase in the number of Irish speakers in the rest of Ireland during the twentieth century. In the most recent census (2006) over forty per cent of the population claimed to be able to speak Irish. Examining these figures in more detail, however, we find that about a quarter of the people who claim to speak Irish do so only within the education system (see Fig. 2). We also find that 5 per cent speak Irish on a daily basis outside the education system and another 6 per cent on a weekly basis. These percentages added together are equal to 16 per cent of the national population. This is close to the percentages reported in the Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research (CLAR) and Institiúid Teangeolaíochta na hÉireann (ITÉ, the Linguistics Institute of Ireland) and ISSP surveys (conducted in 1973; 1983 and 1993; and 2003 respectively).

Insert Figure 2 about here

While the number of Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht has declined, the number outside the Gaeltacht has increased. The result is no great change in the number of

Irish speakers over the century, but the ability of people to speak Irish has declined and the frequency of use of the Irish language has decreased. That is, Irish speakers who learned Irish as a second language, many of whom have limited opportunities to speak Irish, have been replacing communities of Irish speakers, where Irish had been spoken for millennia. Even in the Irish speaking communities fluency and opportunities to speak Irish have diminished.

This increased number of Irish speakers outside the Gaeltacht can be linked to various attempts by the Irish State to revive the Irish language, e.g. symbolic measures, such as the use of Irish words in official names and titles, and concrete measures, such as Irish language tests for civil-service employment and grade promotion. The state also attempted to introduce the general population to Irish via the mass media (Watson 2003) and most crucially, the state imposed Irish on school children. All these State initiatives began in the 1920s and continue, albeit less intrusively, to the present day.

The education system has played an important role in producing Irish speakers. Ó Riagáin argued that “were it not for the fact that the schools continue to produce a small but committed percentage of bilinguals, the maintenance of this small minority of Irish speakers would long since have failed” (Ó Riagáin 1988).

3. The Irish Language and the Education System

The inclusion of the Irish language in the education system, must be understood in the historical context. Although a national education system existed in Ireland prior to independence, there was nothing particularly Irish about the curriculum. The British Government established national education in Ireland in 1831. One of the reasons for providing this system of education seems to have been that the state realized that it

“must mould the heart of Ireland in conformation to British sentiment, and the interests of a united empire; and they [the British] have discovered that the great instrument of this must be EDUCATION” (Taylor 1817). There were many other statements similarly expressing this attitude. The political function of the national education system is perhaps clearer when one realizes that schools such as the hedge school system⁶ (with over 400,000 pupils by the 1820s (Dowling 1968)) already existed in Ireland.

The educational system in Ireland has had a political focus that can be traced back many centuries, for example “parish schools date back to 1537 and the chief aim was the instruction, by the clergy, of the Irish and their children in the English language” (Enhanced British Parliamentary Papers on Ireland, 1801-1922 (EPPI) <http://www.bopcris.ac.uk/eppi/ref12643.html>), i.e. the aim was not education *per se*. The following statement made in 1812 is quite typical of the sentiment expressed over several centuries before Irish independence:

Make any people intelligent and rational and they will gradually lose their prejudices; many of them will acquire a taste for general knowledge, and they will seek for it in the general tongue of the empire. (Dewar 1812: 97)

It is clear from this statement that the education system aimed to make the Irish good citizens of the empire both through education itself and by the replacement of the Irish language with the English language. Although the history is long, the most crucial period has been the last two centuries.

When national education was established in Ireland in 1831 the Irish language was not part of the curriculum. In fact, school was used as a means of eliminating the

Irish language. Parents and teachers cooperated to ensure that children learned to speak English. Parents realized that their children would need English if they were to emigrate or even in Ireland itself.

Then in the latter part of the nineteenth century the Irish language became an important element of the nationalist movement. In part this can be traced back to the writings of the Irish nationalist Thomas Davis (1814-45) in the early 1840s. Particularly from the 1880s onwards the Irish-language movement emphasized the importance of the introduction of Irish into the education system at all levels. This was achieved incrementally from 1879 onwards when Irish was permitted as an extra subject outside of normal school hours. In 1904 a bilingual programme was introduced for Irish-speaking communities. Significantly, in 1913 Irish was made compulsory for matriculation within the National University of Ireland (NUI)⁷ and this policy has remained in place ever since. (Kelly 2002)

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Irish-language movement blamed the education system for the decline of the Irish language. This then became the opinion of the state after independence (1922), with the result that the objective of restoring the language was to be achieved primarily by the education system. Earlier (in 1899) Fr M. P. O’Hickey, a prominent member of the Irish language movement, had written that “even though half the subjects in the programme should have to be sacrificed, the language of the country should be taught in all the schools of Ireland” (Kelly 2002). Although this appears to be an extreme position, quite a few such “sacrifices” were made by the state after independence. To this end, from 1922 singing, history and geography were to be taught through Irish and elementary science, hygiene, nature studies and domestic studies were to be dropped to make room for the teaching of Irish. Other strong policies were put in place over

the following few decades, such as the introduction of compulsory Irish for the Leaving Certificate⁸ examination (i.e., making the passing of Irish a requirement for the award of the certificate). Many of these elements remained in the curriculum at primary and secondary levels until the early 1970s.

As Kelly (2002) pointed out, it has been argued that not only was the level of education in the curriculum sacrificed to the policy of Irish restoration, but that many bright students had been held back by their inability to speak Irish. Since the 1970s various compulsory elements of the state's Irish language policy have been relaxed and abolished as the approach gradually has changed from coercion to minority rights and from revival to survival. In recent years the approach by the state has been less coercive and many initiatives have been taken by independent groups of Irish speakers and Irish-language organizations. The increase in the number of people in the censuses since the 1970s claiming to be Irish speakers may reflect an increasingly positive attitude to the Irish language. Perhaps this is as a result of the reduction of the more coercive elements of Irish-language education, but it is more probably the result of the expansion of secondary education (as a result of the introduction of free secondary education in the 1960s).

4. The Level of Education of Irish Speakers

According to the ISSP 2003 survey 15.7 per cent of the population claim to speak Irish well.⁹ These Irish speakers on average spend longer in education and achieve higher qualifications than those who do not claim to speak Irish well. Irish speakers spend an average of two years more in education (14.4 years compared with 12.6 years) and almost half the Irish speakers (47.6 per cent) went on to tertiary education, compared with over a quarter of the rest (26.7 per cent). On calculating the odds ratio

it can be said that Irish speakers were two and a half times more likely to have gone to university than non Irish speakers.

The most competitive tertiary-level courses require a high level of achievement in six matriculation subjects. In the case of NUI colleges, these subjects must include Irish, hence the incentive to excel in higher level Irish among those whose goal is to gain a place in such courses. On the other hand, there is also an incentive to drop Irish completely, both for those aspiring to NUI places who can qualify for an exemption from Irish and for those applying for the most competitive courses in non-NUI institutions (see item 2 in the 1973-2006 column of Table 1).

4.1 The Relevance of Age

In order to examine the relevance of age in the relationship between speaking Irish and level of education, we divided the data into three age groups: 18-33, 34-53 and 54 years and above (at the time of the survey in 2003). Those who continued with their education in the middle and youngest age-groups could have benefited from the elimination of fees for secondary and tertiary education respectively (free tertiary education was introduced in the 1990s) and would have attended school during the periods of rapid economic and social change of the 1960s-70s and 1990s to the present.

We found that there is no real difference in the level of education between Irish speakers and non Irish speakers amongst the youngest group. There are, however, quite large differences between Irish speakers and non Irish speakers among the middle group, aged 34 to 53 years. In this group 60.7 per cent of Irish speakers went on to tertiary education compared with only 23.1 per cent of non Irish speakers. The

odds ratio tells us that Irish speakers of this age group were five times more likely than their non Irish speaking contemporaries to have gone on to tertiary education.

Finally, among the people born before 1950, whether or not they could speak Irish, this age group was less likely to continue on to Leaving Certificate or tertiary education, but the Irish speakers were more likely than the non Irish speakers to continue on to Leaving Certificate (24.1 per cent compared with 16.1 per cent) and tertiary education (31.5 per cent compared with 14.2 per cent).

The middle age-group of Irish speakers were more likely than the older age-group of Irish speaker to attend tertiary education because Irish language educational policies had reached their zenith in the 1950s and 1960s.

4.2 The Relevance of Gender

Among the non Irish speakers there is no gender difference in terms of tertiary education (26.7 per cent for men and women), but amongst the Irish speakers a higher percentage of women than men went on to tertiary education (51 and 42.9 per cent respectively). This is reflected in research which shows that a higher percentage of girls than boys take Irish for Leaving Certificate and that they also reach higher grades than the boys (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig and Kilroe 2002).

5. The Irish Language as Cultural Capital now and in the future

In the competition for places in tertiary-level courses students attempt to maximize their Leaving Certificate results. In this context each subject, including Irish, is associated with the overall points requirement for each course. In particular, courses

leading to the higher professions or with a low intake of students have tended to be the most competitive and therefore require a very high standard. Hence, entrants to courses such as Medicine, Actuarial and Financial Studies, Veterinary Medicine and Physiotherapy had the highest percentages of grade A results in Irish. (Butler and Nic Ghiolla Phádraig 1999)

In a study of the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht Ó Riagáin (1992) drew convincingly on Bourdieu's (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) concept of linguistic markets to argue that, for the first four decades of the independent Irish State, the Irish language gained strength through its value in passing examinations and accessing employment in the Public Service. Along with members of the teaching profession, civil servants constituted a high proportion of the more committed Irish language speakers (CLAR 1975; Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, *et al.* 1989). The removal in 1974 of the requirement for proficiency in Irish for recruits to the Civil Service and the removal in 1973 of the requirement to pass Irish in the Leaving Certificate reduced this value. This means that the NUI matriculation requirement is now the sole State structure maintaining Irish at Leaving Certificate level. (See Table 1 for a summary of the key events relevant to the Irish language as cultural capital).

Insert Table 1 about here

There are countervailing forces, however, as a new linguistic market is being created. This is based on the growth of employment opportunities through the use of Irish, as an integral part of the work rather than as a mere entrance requirement. While the State is the “driver” in this, by acceding to demands for language rights by Irish speakers, it has created a different set of labour market dynamics based, for the first time, on the private sector as well as the public sector. The Official Languages Act

2003 lays a requirement on public sector bodies to produce Irish language plans (see Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs 2004). Private translation services have been subcontracted to help meet some of the demand for production of Irish documentation. The legislation has been criticized for not offering language equality in the full range of services (Ó Laighin 2003). Nevertheless, it is significant that, for the first time this Act makes Irish “the default language of service delivery in the Gaeltacht” for public bodies (see Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs 2004: 28). The negative impact on Irish of public service bodies, who routinely conducted business in the Gaeltacht in English, was identified in research over thirty years ago (CLAR 1975). A Language Commissioner has been appointed to support citizens who experience difficulties in exercising their rights to transact business with public bodies in Irish. Also, official status for Irish in the EU since January 2007 has already begun to provide extensive employment opportunities for Irish speakers as interpreters.

The joint impact of both initiatives has been to increase the demand for workers with ability in Irish across a greater diversity of occupations than heretofore. Also, the launch of the Irish-language television station (TG4) in 1996 gives an example of how this might have an impact on the study of Irish: following the announcement that TG4 was to be established, the number of students taking Irish in first year increased in all the university colleges of the NUI (from 355 to 525 over the course of one year 1992-3 and 1993-4). These figures continued to climb during the decade peaking at 768 in 1998-9 (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig and Kilroe 2002). The station itself offers some employment opportunities, but the main demand has come through independent media companies who are contracted to provide programmes in Irish, or to “dub” imported programmes. Such jobs are viewed as “cool” and exciting additions to the

traditional mainstream teaching and public-service opportunities. Nonetheless, with regard to the official status of the Irish language in the EU, it became clear during 2007 that there were not enough Irish speakers with the necessary qualifications to be employed as interpreters in the European Parliament.

6. Conclusion

It seems most likely that the policies implemented in the decades after independence produced more Irish speakers among those who stayed on longer in school and the policies gave an educational advantage to Irish speakers and to those who were good at Irish. The reason for the higher percentage of Irish speakers with higher levels of education may be both that those who could speak Irish were at an educational advantage and that those with higher levels of education had been exposed to Irish for longer. For the middle age-group of Irish speakers, those who had the educational ability could for example go on to university and follow a career as a teacher or civil servant. These careers had Irish-language requirements and were therefore more obvious choices for Irish speakers. Furthermore, the possibility of a career as a teacher may help to explain the gender difference discussed above, insofar as Irish-speaking women could go on to tertiary education to become teachers, whereas non Irish-speaking women could not, at a time when married women were barred from many professions other than teaching. This advantage, as well as the ability of the education system to produce Irish speakers, has decreased in recent decades because of the softening of compulsory policies in relation to the Irish language. Also, the improvement in the economy over the past decade and more has meant that public-service positions and their associated Irish-language tests have lost their dominance in the landscape of Irish employment. The fact that the same percentage of the younger

groups of Irish speakers and non Irish speakers go on to tertiary education suggests that whatever advantage Irish speakers may have had in the past no longer exists, but it may also suggest that the education system no longer serves to produce Irish speakers to the same extent as it did in the past.

It is arguable that compelling children to learn Irish at the expense of other school subjects and to the disadvantage of those children who had a difficulty learning to speak it was too high a cost to pay to revive the Irish language. But if Ó Riagáin is correct in his assessment that schools maintain “this small minority of Irish speakers” (Ó Riagáin 1988) the Irish language may be in serious danger, since school policies requiring Irish have weakened.

One viewpoint is that although there is an increasingly positive attitude to the Irish language, it may remain a symbol of Irish national identity while fewer and fewer people speak it. This does not appear to be the case as an increasing number of all-Irish schools have been founded since the 1970s at both primary and secondary levels. These are schools in which Irish is the language of education. Parents choose to send their children to these schools. The existence of all-Irish schools means that children can be educated in Irish by family choice rather than being compelled by the state. According to Murtagh (2003) those who are educated in all-Irish schools are more likely to continue speaking Irish after they leave education. As well as the linguistic advantage of being educated in Irish, these pupils often also have a network of other Irish speakers which can continue even after completion of education. But although most secondary pupils continue to take Irish as a subject for their Junior and Leaving Certificates (currently 90 per cent and declining), only 2.3 per cent of them attend all-Irish schools.

Looking to the future it is difficult to say what the long-term effect of the shift from policies of compulsion to minority-rights policies will be. It appears that the increasingly positive attitude to Irish (expressed chiefly in private and in opinion polls) will mean that Irish will survive at least as a private symbol of national identity. At the same time the education system in general will continue to produce what appears to be a decreasing number of Irish speakers. The exception to this is the system of all-Irish schools which may help Irish to survive for a few more generations.

Looking back over the past few centuries it is interesting to note that the language that was associated with poverty and ignorance and was beaten out of children in the nineteenth century came to be associated with education during the twentieth century to such an extent that in the second half of the century Irish speakers were far more likely than non Irish speakers to go on to tertiary education. This pattern, however, no longer holds among the younger adults in the population. That the number of people claiming to be Irish speakers has continued to rise indicates that while the language has lost ground as cultural capital it has gained in symbolic value.

Notes

1. In Ireland “secondary schools” are a particular type of school; nonetheless, for simplicity, we use the term “secondary education” throughout to refer not only to secondary schools, but to all schools between the primary and tertiary levels.
2. Trinity College Dublin was the first university in Ireland, founded by the English monarch Queen Elizabeth I in 1592.
3. This estimation was made by John Windele over a century later and may not be quite accurate.
4. It is estimated that 1 million people died during this Famine and another 1 million emigrated. Emigration continued and the population has never returned to the pre-Famine level. This famine made a lasting impression on the “Irish psyche”.
5. There are the exceptional cases of a few very young Irish speakers who have not yet learned to speak English and a few old people who have forgotten how to speak English.
6. Hedge Schools were basically secret schools because schools conducted by and for Catholics had been forbidden. They are called Hedge Schools because some were supposedly held outdoors under the shelter of a hedge.
7. The National University of Ireland was established by the British Government in 1908 and had four constituent universities.
8. Secondary education in Ireland culminates in a Leaving Certificate examination in which pupils (aged 17-19 years) normally take six subjects. By comparison, pupils in Britain specialize in two or three subjects. Within this context of a broad range of six subjects, Irish has continued to be of significance for mobility through educational qualifications.
9. For convenience, from here on we will refer to those who claimed to speak Irish well as Irish speakers and the rest as non Irish speakers.

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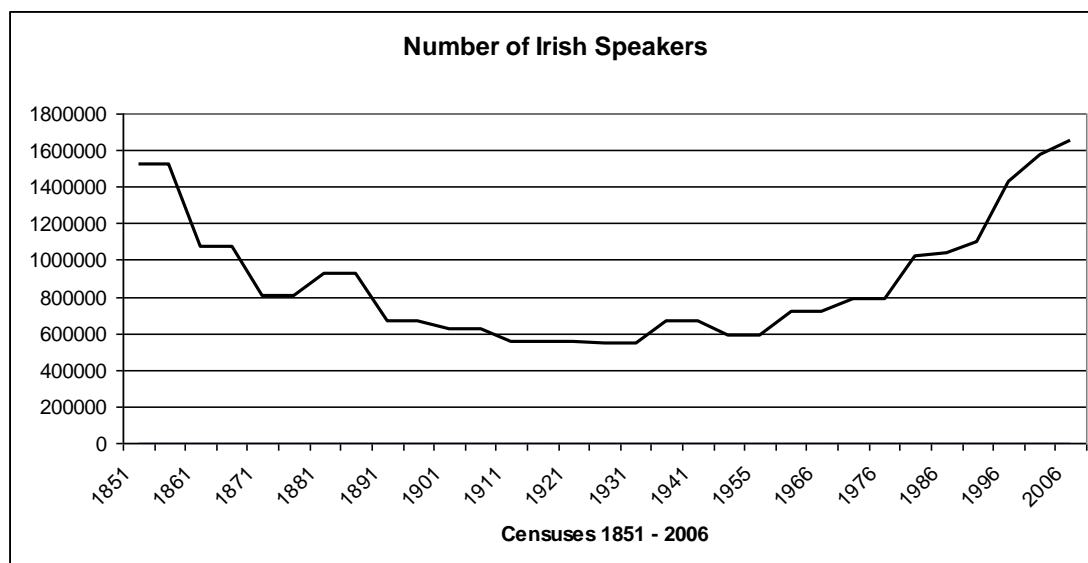


Figure 1 Number of Irish Speakers: Censuses 1861-2006

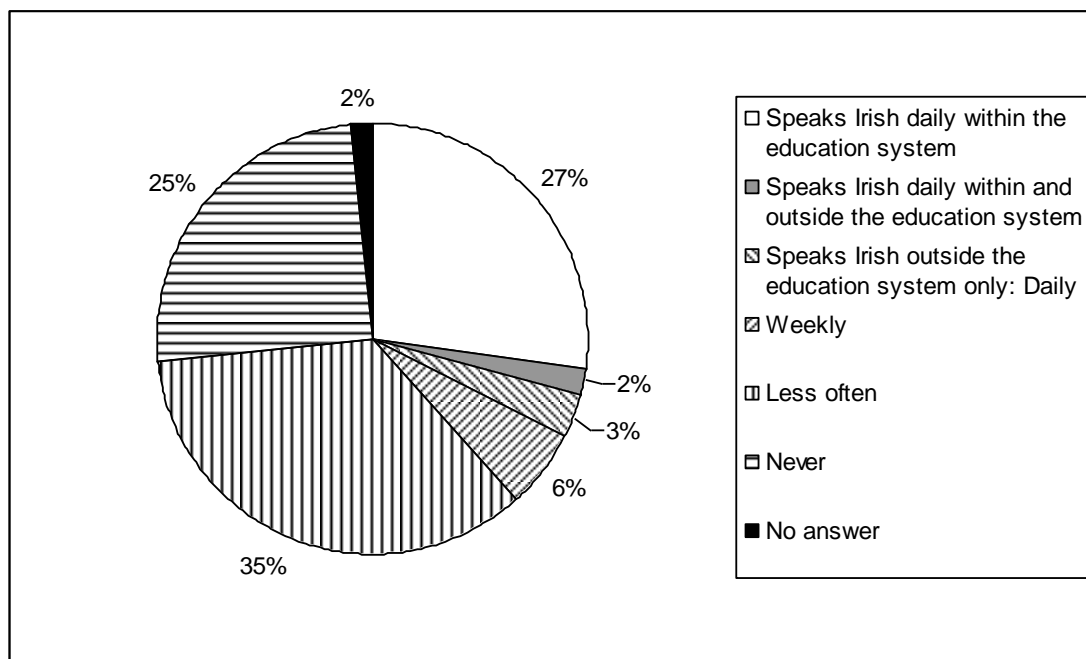


Figure 2 The regularity with which Irish speakers speak Irish: Census 2006

<p>From 1922 – 1973</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Irish was introduced as a requirement in the school curriculum and for public service recruitment. National University of Ireland (1908) requirement of Irish for Matriculation was also influential in promoting knowledge of the language. 2. Secondary education was required for white collar public service jobs, which were highly sought after. 3. Tertiary education was largely the preserve of elites who would enter business and the professions, and, with the exception of education, the Irish language was not a requirement of employment. The majority of the population did not attend beyond primary education. 	<p>1973 – 2006</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Secondary education was provided free from 1967 and average levels of education rose dramatically. Attending secondary education is now virtually universal in Ireland (Hout, 2007). This presumably helped to increase the number of Irish speakers. There was an expansion of tertiary education subsequently, with additional support for tertiary-level students; but neither the new higher-education institutions nor the simultaneously expanding private-sector employment had an Irish language requirement. 2. “Compulsory Irish” for obtaining secondary certificates was dropped in 1973 and the regulations for exemption from the study of Irish gradually became more liberal. Alternative mobility opportunities in Science and Technology, Information and Communications, Technology, Financial Services, Business, etc. displaced the former highly
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	valued public service occupations as employment goals. The “points system” for entry to tertiary-level courses introduced a new dynamic regarding Irish – either to get an exemption, or to excel.
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Table 1 The changing cultural capital value of Irish 1922 – 1973 and 1973 – 2006