# THE INTRODUCTION OF ENGLISH IN GAELIC SCOTLAND, IRELAND AND WALES: THE DYNAMICS OF IMPOSITION, ACQUIESCENCE AND ASSERTION

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## Abstract

From the Middle Ages onwards political authorities in Scotland, Ireland and Wales have implemented policies to establish the English language and displace the Celtic vernaculars. These measures have met with varying reactions in Celtic-language communities, although the principal outcome everywhere has been language shift to English. Cultural leaders of different kinds have followed different strategies for language retention over the centuries, typically involving varying degrees of acquiescence, with full-scale rejection of English rarely understood as a viable option. Activists often endeavoured to retain particular spaces and contexts for the Celtic vernaculars, while conceding key public and economic domains to English. These strategies have also developed in different political contexts, so that, in contrast to the situation of Gaelic in Scotland and Welsh in Wales, defence of the Irish language has long been connected to the issue of national independence. In modern times, activists concentrate on seeking viable strategies to support the Celtic-language minorities in the globalised, digital world.

Keywords: language shift, language maintenance, centralisation, bilingualism, nationalism.

## Resumen

Desde la Edad Media en adelante las autoridades políticas en Escocia, Irlanda y Gales han puesto en funcionamiento medidas dirigidas a instaurar la lengua inglesa y desplazar a las lenguas vernáculas celtas. Tales procedimientos han tenido diversa acogida en las comunidades de habla celta siendo, no obstante, el principal resultado en todas ellas el cambio idiomático. A lo largo de los siglos líderes culturales de diversa índole han seguido distintas estrategias de preservación de lenguas que normalmente conllevan grados de aceptación variable del inglés, pero el rechazo pleno de este es rara vez entendido como una opción viable. Con frecuencia los activistas pugnaron por mantener espacios y contextos específicos para las lenguas vernáculas celtas, mientras concedían al inglés dominios clave en lo público y lo económico. Cabe señalar que estas estrategias se han desarrollado también en distintos contextos políticos, así, en contraste con la situación del gaélico en Escocia y el galés en Gales, la defensa de la lengua irlandesa ha estado largamente conectada con la cuestión de la independencia nacional. En la actualidad los activistas se concentran en encontrar estrategias viables que den soporte a las minorías de habla celta dentro del mundo globalizado, digital.

Palabras clave: cambio idiomático, preservación de la lengua, centralización, bilingüismo, nacionalismo.

From the Middle Ages onwards political authorities in Scotland, Ireland and Wales began to enact laws and implement policies to establish the English language and displace the Celtic vernaculars from public institutions or private use. In Ireland, the Statute of Kilkenny of 1366 required English settlers in Ireland and Irish persons living among them to use only English, while in Wales the so-called "Act of Union" of 1536 stipulated that only English could be used in the law courts and that all holders of public offices would be required to use English (see Crowley, 15, and Roberts, 129-30). In Scotland, from the early seventeenth century, the government pursued an aggressive policy of linguistic assimilation, or indeed extirpation, in relation to the Gaelic language. The most direct statement of this policy is the enactment of the Scottish Privy Council known as the "Education Act of 1616". In order to advance and establish "the trew religion" and promote "civilitie godlines knawledge and learning", the government decreed "that the vulgar Inglish toung be universallie plantit and the Irische language which is one of the cheif and principall causis of the continewance of barbaritie and incivilitie amangis the inhabitantis of the Ilis and Heylandis, may be abolisheit and removit" through the establishment of schools in every parish of the kingdom (Macdonald, lxi-lxii.).

While the most important long-term response to these policies and the ongoing pressure for linguistic assimilation was language shift from the Celtic vernaculars to English, leaders and intellectuals from Celtic language communities often expressed rejection and resistance in various ways. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, for example, Gaelic poets in Scotland became increasingly assertive in mounting defences of the Gaelic language, as did their counterparts in Ireland, whose works tended to take a more political, national articulation, set against a background of conquest and expropriation following the Battle of Kinsale (1601) and the Flight of the Earls (1607). This article will consider a number of different aspects of these responses through the centuries, using illustrations from Wales, Ireland and especially Gaelic Scotland. While there are significant differences between the three contexts in terms of the time scale and the trajectory of language shift, there are many important points of commonality between them.

In Scotland, the most prominent early expression of rejection or resistance is not actually in Gaelic but in Scots: the complaint of the Gaelic-speaking poet Walter Kennedy, as preserved in William Dunbar's "The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie" (c. 1500). Kennedy came from Carrick in south Ayrshire, an area that remained Gaelic-speaking long after the emergence of the "Highland Line" that separated the main Gaelic-speaking area of the north and west from the newly de-Gaelicised "Lowlands". Responding to the coarse insults that Dunbar had directed at Gaelic language and culture, Kennedy responded:

> Thow lufis nane Irische, elf, I understand,
> Bot it suld be all trew Scottis mennis lede [language];
> It was the gud language of this land,
> And Scota it causit to multiply and sprede,
> Quhill Corspatrik, that we of tresoun rede,
> Thy forefader, maid Irisch and Irisch men thin,

Throu his tresoun broght Inglise rumplis in,

 So wald thy self, mycht thou to him succede. (Mackenzie, 5-20, § 44, ll. 345-52).

For Kennedy, then, Gaelic –which was invariably labelled *Irish* in Scots/English sources between the sixteenth century and the middle of the late eighteenth– was the original and "trew" language of Scotland, displaced by treason and English incomers. Two centuries later, in 1707, the Mull poet and minister Maighstir Seathan MacGill'Eathain also cast aspersions on those Scottish leaders who had abandoned Gaelic: "Reic iád san chúirt í, air cáint úir o Nde | 's do thréig le hair [.i. tàir] budh nár leo ncán'mhain fein", that is, '[t]hey sold it in the court for a new speech dating from only yesterday | and scornfully abandoned it: they were ashamed of their own language' (Ó Baoill, 100-03, ll. 27-28).

The most famous defence of Gaelic in this period came from the Jacobite poet Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair in his "Moladh an Ùghdair don t-Seann Chànain Ghàidhlig" (Praise of the Ancient Gaelic Language), composed *c*. 1738 (Thomson, 77-80, §§ 10-11). After praising Gaelic as the language of the Garden of Eden, Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair asserted its past and future place in Scotland (my translation):

Mhair i fòs
Is cha tèid a glòir air chall
Dh'aindeoin gò
Is mìoruin mhòir nan Gall.

*Is i labhair Alba*
*Is gallbhodaich fèin*
*Ar flaith, ar prionnsaidhe*
*Is ar diùcanna gun èis...*

Still it survived
And its voice will not be lost
Despite the deceit
And great ill-will of the Lowlanders.

It is [Gaelic] that Scotland spoke
And even the Lowland churls
Our nobles, our princes
And our dukes, without defect...

To this day "mì-rùn mòr nan Gall" (to give it its modern, uninflected form) remains a common phrase in Gaelic, used to refer to the hostility towards Gaelic among non-Gaelic speakers that remains a disturbingly prominent feature of Scottish life.

In Ireland, the poets repeatedly identified language as a key marker of national identity. A potent example is Aogán Ó Rathaille's vigorously Jacobite "Tairngaireacht Dhuinn Fhírinne', 'The Prophecy of Donn Fírinne', (1710(?)), which presents the restoration of Irish and the suppression of English as joyous outcomes of the true king's anticipated restoration (Dinneen and O'Donoghue, 166-67, § 4):

> Beidh Éire go súgach 's a dúnta go haerach
> Is Gaedhilg 'gá scrúdadh n-a múraibh ag éigsibh;
> Béarla na mbúr ndubh go cúthail fá néaltaíbh,
> Is Séamus n-a chúirt ghil ag tabhairt chonganta do Ghaedhealaibh.

> Ireland will be joyful, and her strongholds will be merry;
> And the learned will cultivate Gaelic in their schools;
> The black boors' English will be humbled and put beneath clouds
> And James in his bright court will lend his aid to the Gaels.

Another Munster poet of this period, Donnchadh Caoch Ó Mathghamhna, expressed a similar viewpoint but with even more forceful hostility to the foreign incomers and their language. Thus, the poem "Tá an oiread-san tarcuisne ar bhreathaibh na binn-Gaoidhilge" ('There is such disregard for the matter of the sweet Irish language' (Ó Foghludha, 242-43, §§ 1-3; my translation):

> Is ise ba chneasta, ba ghasta is do b' fhíor-líomhtha
> Do b'oilte, do b'aite is bu bhlasta i ngach brigh binn-ghuib,
> Ba snoidhte, ba snasta ar reacaireacht gaois-laoithe —
> Ní hionann is glafairneach mhalluighthe ár bhfíor-naímhde.

> Sirim an tAthair 's an Geala-Spirid caoin naoimhtha
> 'S go deimhin dár gcabhair-na gairmim fíor Íosa,
> Scrios ar na Gallaibh 's a n-agall go ndíbrighthar
> Ionnas go leanainn-se teanga mo phrímh-shinsir.

> It [Irish] is the most gentle, the most wise, the most truly polished
> Most learned, most excellent and most precise in each sweet-mouthed meaning,
> Most comely, most elegant for recitation of artful lays —
> Not so is the accursed prattle of our true enemies.

> I entreat the Father and the gentle bright Holy Spirit
> And indeed for our aid I call Jesus himself,
> To destroy the Foreigners and banish their speech
> So that I may adhere to the language of my great forefathers.

This intertwining of national, ethnolinguistic and religious rhetoric is common in defences of the Irish poetic language, given the connection between adherence to the Catholic faith and resistance to English/British rule, but plays no such role in counterpart material from Scotland or Wales.

Poetic rhetoric of this kind could become stereotyped, however, with any real political relevance drained away. Songs in praise of the antiquity, beauty, vigour and expressiveness of the Gaelic language proliferated in Scotland from the mid-eighteenth century (see McLeod), but the composition and transmission of such material by no means signalled resistance, organised or otherwise, to the imposition of English or collective determination to maintain and promote Gaelic (a pattern that Joan-Lluís Marfany (137-67) has detected in the supposed "literary revivals" of minority languages in Europe more generally). The forceful rhetoric of this anonymous song to the Ossianic Society of Glasgow University (*c.* 1833) gives a useful illustration of the kind of material in question (Macrury, 150, §§ 4-6):

'S i 'Ghailig cainnt nam fineachan,
'S i 'Ghailig cainnt ar cridheachan,
'S i dhuisgeas blaths is cinneadas;
Cha 'n ionnan i 's a Bheurla.

S i so ar canain mhathaireil,
O! 's caoimhneil agus baigheil i;
Gur math gu deanamh manrain i;
Gu brath cha leug sinn eug i.

Lionaibh mar a b' abhaist duibh,
Na glaineachan le gairdeachas,
Gu aiseirigh na Gailig
Is gu buille bais na Beurla.

Gaelic is the language of the clans,
Gaelic is the language of our hearts,
She rouses warmth and kindred-feeling;
English is not the same.

This is our mother tongue,
O! it is gentle and friendly;
It is good for making a melody;
We will never let it die.

Fill the glasses with gladness,
As is your custom,
To the revival of Gaelic
And the death-blow to English.

This call to deliver a "death-blow to English" was essentially idle.

From the middle of the eighteenth century the assimilationist ideologies promoted by centralising authorities began to place increased attention on the inability of monoglot Celtic-language speakers to participate fully in civil society and economic activity in a consolidating Britain. These ideologies became more forceful in the nine-

teenth century, driven by the administrative needs of the modernising nation-state (see Wolf) and the operational requirements of an industrialising national economy. Again and again, in Wales, Scotland and Ireland alike, officials and commentators argued that the adoption of English was essential to enable material progress and social participation.

In 1847 the government-appointed Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales published the reports of their work in three large blue volumes. The views expressed in their report concerning the Welsh language were strikingly negative (*Reports of the Commissioners,* Part II, 66; Part III, 61; Part I, 3):

> The Welsh language is a vast drawback to Wales, and a manifold barrier to the moral progress and commercial prosperity of the people. It is not easy to over-estimate its evil effects.

> [The Welsh] remain inferior [to the English] in every branch of practical knowledge and skill.

> Equally in his new, as in his old, home, his language keeps him under the hatches, being one in which he can neither acquire nor communicate the necessary information. It is the language of old fashioned agriculture, of theology, and of simple rustic life, while all the world about him is English [...] He is left to live in an underworld of his own and the march of society goes [...] completely over his head!

Elsewhere in the report, the commissioners also cast aspersions on the morals and manners of the Welsh people, prompting widespread outrage in Wales, so that the matter is remembered as "Brad y Llyfrau Gleision", 'The Treachery of the Blue Books' (see Gwyneth Tyson Roberts). This view that minority language communities were cut off from wider intellectual and cultural discourse and that modernisation and development required their assimilation into larger political units was widely held in the nineteenth century, and received its classic statement from John Stuart Mill in 1861:

> Experience proves, that it is possible for one nationality to merge and be absorbed in another: and when it was originally an inferior and more backward part of the human race, the absorption is greatly to its advantage. Nobody can suppose that it is not more beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of French Navarre, to be brought into the current of the ideas and feelings of a highly civilised and cultivated people — to be a member of the French nationality, admitted on equal terms to all the privileges of French citizenship, sharing the advantages of French protection, and the dignity and prestige of French power — than to sulk on his own rocks, the half-savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement of the world. The same remark applies to the Welshman or the Scottish Highlander, as members of the British nation. (375)

The British inflection of this ideology was most famously expressed by Matthew Arnold (1822-88), celebrated poet, essayist and school inspector, who asserted in his influential 1867 volume *On the Study of Celtic Literature* that:

The fusion of all the inhabitants of these islands into one homogeneous, English-speaking whole, the breaking down of barriers between us, the swallowing up of separate provincial nationalities, is a consummation to which the natural course of things irresistibly tends; it is a necessity of what is called modern civilisation, and modern civilisation is a real, legitimate force; the change must come, and its accomplishment is a mere affair of time. The sooner the Welsh language disappears as an instrument of the practical, political, social life of Wales, the better; the better for England, the better for Wales itself. (12)

The dominant version of assimilationist language ideology in Britain, however, tended to place greater emphasis on the advantages of economic mobility and access to opportunity than to matters of identity, affinity and belonging. Often the two were intertwined, however, and the economic rationale could appear as an instrumental justification for a deeper form of assimilationism, as in the Registrar-General for Scotland's discussion of the results of the census of 1871 (Census Office):

The Gaelic language may be what it likes, both as to antiquity and beauty, but it decidedly stands in the way of the civilisation of the natives making use of it, and shuts them out from the paths open to their fellow-countrymen who speak the English tongue. It ought, therefore, to cease to be taught in all our national schools; and as we are one people, we should have but ONE language.

Far from prompting broad-based resistance, these negative or constricting views were widely accepted within Celtic language communities. In the nineteenth century it was not uncommon to find leading voices in these communities from the worlds of politics, business or culture asserting the value and necessity of linguistic assimilation, especially for reasons of material advancement and "improvement". In Ireland, the most famous statement came from Daniel O'Connell, the so-called *Liberator* who led the campaign for "Catholic Emancipation" (the securing of full civil and political rights for Catholics) in the 1820s. O'Connell was a native Irish speaker from a prominent family with deep cultural roots in the language; his aunt, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, had composed one of the most famous poetic works in Irish, "Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire" ('The Lament for Art O'Leary') (*c*. 1770). Yet O'Connell said in 1833:

I am sufficiently utilitarian not to regret its abandonment [the Irish language]. A diversity of tongues is no benefit; it was first imposed on mankind as a curse, at the building of Babel. It would be of vast advantage to mankind if all the inhabitants of the earth spoke the same language. Although the Irish language is connected with many recollections that twine around the hearts of Irishmen, yet the superior utility of the English tongue, as the medium of modern communication, is so great, that I can witness without a sigh the gradual disuse of the Irish. (Daunt, 14-15).

In Wales, the prominent industrialist David Davies of Llandinam made a similar point in more pointed terms, writing (originally in Welsh) in 1885, "If you wish to continue to eat barley bread and lie on straw mattresses, then keep on shouting

*Bydded i'r Gymraeg fyw am byth* ['May the Welsh language live forever']. But if you want to eat white bread and roast beef you must learn English" (see Breverton)

As part of the government's preparations to develop a system of state education in Scotland, which came to fruit with the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872, the advocate (barrister) Alexander Nicolson was commissioned to prepare a *Report on the State of Education in the Hebrides*, which was pub-lished in 1866. Nicolson was a native Gaelic speaker from Skye who made a successful legal career in Edinburgh but is best known in Gaelic circles for a major collection of proverbs, which remains in print today. In Nicolson's report (125-26), he commented as follows:

> The fact that, in respect of their language alone, most of them [Highlanders] are in the position of foreigners when they set foot in the Lowlands, is a very special feature in their condition. This disability has undoubtedly been one of the grand obstacles to their improvement. It is not necessary to hold that the use of the Gaelic language is per se incompatible with enlightenment, even without recurring to the days of St Columba, to whom the civilisation of Scotland and Britain owes so much. Nor is it likely that the mere possession of the language of Shakespeare, supposing it to be in-stantaneously conferred upon all the inhabitants of the Highlands, would straightway produce a marked change in their character and habits. It would not, I think, of itself, and by virtue of any inherent civilizing power in it, make them more intellectually acute, more moral, or more religious, qualities in which, in spite of everything else inferior in their condition, they can bear favourable comparison with any portion of Her Majesty's subjects. But it would unquestionably convey upon them a power, the lack of which [...] is one of the most serious hindrances to their attainment of their just position in the scale of civilisation — the power of expressing their ideas in a manner intelligible to the majority of their countrymen, and of receiving ideas in return. The disadvantage under which Highlanders, unable to speak English freely, labour as competitors for employment in the South, other than the most mechanical, is too obvious to require illustration. They find themselves, in fact, in the predica-ment of dumb persons, and their sensitiveness to ridicule often exposes them to the pain of being reckoned barbarians, by persons perhaps inferior to themselves in all the elements that constitute real civility, but endowed with the precious faculty of speaking some more or less intelligible form of the English language.

Nicolson appears to accept two of the key premises of the assimilationist ideology, that without English language skills, Gaelic speakers were unable to participate in intellectual exchange (what Mill (375) would have called "participation [...] in the general movement of the world") or to succeed economically in the Lowlands. On the other hand, outside commentators like Mill (375), who saw nothing in minority language communities but "the half-savage relic[s] of past times", Nicolson would not have detected in the monoglot Gaels "all the elements that constitute real civility" or drawn attention to the contribution of Gaelic culture to "enlightenment" through the centuries.

Other Gaelic writers of the period rationalised the displacement of Gaelic in slightly different terms. In the introduction to his 1897 poetry collection *Luinneagan Luaineach*, Dr John MacGregor, a Lewis-born medical surgeon and writer who was active in Gaelic circles in London, Edinburgh and Glasgow at the turn of the twentieth century, wrote as follows:

> It is true enough that English has cut a short march, as it were, on Gaelic, as the business language of bread and butter, which unfortunately we cannot do without. And however devoted to the Gaelic we may be, we should never under-value the advantage and even the necessity for Highlanders to know English, without which they cannot nowadays make much headway in the world. But if we Highlanders have such small heads as to be capable of containing only one language, we are not the kind of people that we claim to be. [...] It is the duty of every Highlander to do his best to uphold the language, not only as a true and faithful servant, but also in order that, if the heroic language of a heroic people be doomed to die, its last days may be its best; and that it may perish like a gallant man-o'-war sinking in the ocean, with her flags flying, and fighting to the last. (9)

MacGregor's comments demonstrate how much of the "revivalist" activity on behalf of Gaelic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fully accepted the marginal socio-economic position of Gaelic vis-à-vis English and was in no way aimed at bringing about a transformation of that fundamental dynamic. It was essentially conceded that Gaelic had no "commercial value", to use the preferred phrase of the time, so that arguments in favour of language maintenance were typically framed in strictly cultural terms.

On the other hand, a distinction can be drawn between securing economic access and achieving fully blown assimilation of the kind urged by Arnold and the Registrar-General for Scotland. Political and intellectual leaders from the Celtic language communities were much more concerned about the former (as was the mass of the population, who were clearly keen to acquire English), and they concentrated their efforts on finding ways to develop and maintain distinct spaces for the Celtic languages within a developing Britain. Securing an appropriate place for the Celtic language alongside English within the school curriculum following the establishment of state education in the 1870s was the principal aim of language activists in the following decades. Many, like MacGregor, argued that bilingualism was a viable strategy for the minority language communities, and in Scotland and Wales no conflict was perceived between loyalty to native language and culture and loyalty to monarch and empire.

The situation was different in Ireland, where some intellectuals and activists from the 1870s onwards pressed a very different interpretation and strategy, even if economic assimilationism (much of it driven by the necessity of emigration) remained very powerful among the wider population, which had undergone extremely rapid language shift from the time of the Great Famine of the 1840s onwards. The classic statement of this new revivalist ideology in Ireland was that given by Douglas Hyde, who was to become the first president of Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League), in his 1892 address "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland":

> The Irish race is at present in a most anomalous position, imitating England and yet apparently hating it. How can it produce anything good in literature, art, or institu-

tions as long as it is actuated by motives so contradictory? Besides, I believe it is our Gaelic past which, though the Irish race does not recognise it just at present, is really at the bottom of the Irish heart, and prevents us becoming citizens of the Empire [...]

In fact, I may venture to say, that, up to the beginning of the present century, neither man, woman, nor child of the Gaelic race, either of high blood or low blood, existed in Ireland who did not either speak Irish or understand it. But within the last ninety years we have, with an unparalleled frivolity, deliberately thrown away our birthright and Anglicised ourselves [...] The race will from henceforth be changed; for as Monsieur Jubainville says of the influence of Rome upon Gaul, England 'has definitely conquered us, she has even imposed upon us her language, that is to say, the form of our thoughts during every instant of our existence'. It is curious that those who most fear West Britonism have so eagerly consented to imposing upon the Irish race [...] 'the form of our thoughts during every instant of our existence.'

I have no hesitation at all in saying that every Irishfeeling Irishman, who hates the reproach of WestBritonism, should set himself to encourage the efforts which are being made to keep alive our once great national tongue. The losing of it is our greatest blow, and the sorest stroke that the rapid Anglicisation of Ireland has inflicted upon us. In order to deAnglicise ourselves we must at once arrest the decay of the language (As quoted in Crowley, 186-87)

The revivalist ideology of the Gaelic League became immensely influential in early twentieth-century Ireland, particularly once it had become accepted by the Sinn Féin party, which drove the successful campaign for Irish independence. The stated objective of the new Irish Free State government was to bring about the *restoration* of the Irish language. Such "restoration" could logically be interpreted as requiring the displacement of the English language and the re-creation of a monolingual Irish-speaking Ireland, but there are real doubts as to whether such an aim ever enjoyed meaningful support among political leaders and civil servants, let alone the wider population, the great majority of which had passed through the great language shift of the nineteenth century and developed a new cultural identity rooted in the English language. As the sociologist Donncha Ó hÉallaithe (182-83) has observed:

It is too easy to blame the state for the failure of the revival. That the state was negligent, unimaginative, authoritarian, obstructive, piecemeal, hostile and downright stupid at times, is beyond question. Even if it had been the opposite of all those things, the revival would have failed because the people in English-speaking communities did not want to revert to Irish. Forcing them to learn Irish as a second language was one thing, but the revival project wanted them to replace English with Irish as well. Why should they? English had become their language, in the same way as Irish was still the language of some Gaeltacht areas. To change the language of Kilkerrin [Anglicised form of the Irish "Cill Chiaráin"] in East Galway to Irish would have done as much violence to that community's cultural life as changing the language of Cill Chiaráin in Conamara from Irish to English. There are examples of Irish-speaking communities within which language shift was

arrested, but there are no examples of Irish being restored as the main language of any community after language change had taken place.

Since the 1960s, the Irish state has moved away from a policy of national language revival to a model by which the existing Irish-speaking population will be supported and serviced (Óhlearnáin). This much narrowed ambition can be analogised to development strategies that have emerged elsewhere, by which particular minority-language networks are to be supported, as an alternative to wider, more ambitious societal initiatives. One inflection of this approach, typically articulated in relation to urban communities, is to seek to enable minority-language speakers to live their lives through the minority language to the greatest extent possible (even if the majority around them continue to live entirely through the majority language). As the nature of social life changes, so too does the nature of "living one's life". Thus the current national language strategy in Wales aims to equip "Welsh speakers to participate fully as digital citizens" and expresses "our ambition and our expectation... that Welsh speakers should be able to conduct their lives electronically through the medium of Welsh, should they so desire, whether that be for cultural, informational, entertainment, leisure, retail, transactional, community, or social networking purposes" (Welsh Government).

In the early twenty-first century, all three languages, Gaelic, Irish and Welsh appear to have reached a crisis of viability, although the situation of Gaelic is much the weakest and Welsh retains the strongest social base of the three. Activists have shifted their terms of reference and debate accordingly, so that questions such as whether a language community can meaningfully exist in the absence of intergenerational transmission have come to the fore, or how 'post-vernacular' language use might meaningfully function. As in past centuries, the dominant position of English is unquestionable, but varying strategies seem possible, some more polarising or puristic than others. In this sense there is continuity through the long centuries of language minoritisation.

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