



IS1306 “New Speakers in a Multilingual Europe: Opportunities and Challenges

The Celtic Sociolinguistics Symposium

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School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, Ireland

Event Report

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Aims

The creation of so-called ‘new speakers’ has frequently been acknowledged as a fundamental element of language maintenance, revitalisation and revival for small languages (e.g. Smith Christmas et al. forthcoming). Each of the Celtic languages (Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Manx Gaelic, Welsh, Cornish and Breton) is currently experiencing various levels of minoritisation. It has thus been recognised that supporting populations of speakers who have not grown up with the Celtic languages in the home or in the community is an important aspect of ensuring the vitality of the languages. This is seen as an important strategy alongside the promotion of the languages amongst populations of users with more traditional, ‘native’-like profiles. The Celtic languages offer an interesting insight into issues pertaining to new speakers of minority languages. Of course, the languages are derived from a common linguistic source. In addition, however, they offer an opportunity to investigate new speaker issues in related languages that have different historical trajectories, that currently have different levels of vitality, and that are operating in different sociolinguistic environments with various levels of official and community support. The Symposium brought together researchers working on the Celtic varieties in order to establish how new speakers of the Celtic languages emerge¹ in each context and how these new speakers negotiate the sociolinguistic environments in which they function. The aim of the event was to review current

research on new speakers of the Celtic languages in order to identify common research themes that might provide the basis for further collaborative research initiatives in the future.

Themes and Discussions

Over the course of the two-day event a number of salient themes emerged in relation to new speakers of the Celtic languages. These themes have the potential to provide the basis for future collaboration between the participants. The themes are 1) the contribution of education to promoting/creating new speakers; and 2) the linguistic characteristics of new speaker speech varieties and the way that these are perceived by others and by new speakers themselves.

1. Education and new speakers of the Celtic languages

While education has long been a cornerstone of policy measures aimed at language maintenance, revitalisation and revival in minority languages worldwide, it is also widely acknowledged that education alone is not sufficient to ensure the future vitality of 'small' languages (e.g. chapters in Hornberger 2008). The varying levels of support for the Celtic languages in the form of educational provisions provide an opportunity to assess the role that education plays in the revival of the languages amongst new speakers. Although education has never been demonstrated to 'create' new speakers per se, it is frequently cited as a catalyst. That is to say that the experience of languages in education is a potentially transformative experience. It can trigger a commitment to the language that extends beyond the confines of the classroom and the school and can lead to the advent of new speakers of the Celtic languages. However, papers at the event illustrated that the provision of education in the Celtic languages varies hugely, from Irish as a compulsory subject for all students in the Republic of Ireland, to widespread bilingual and/or immersion programmes in Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Manx Gaelic, Welsh and Breton, to the very limited educational provisions in Cornish. Nevertheless, it was clear that new speakers have emerged in each of the languages, despite the wide variation in educational provision in each polity. This begs the question as to what is the contribution of education to the revitalisation/revival enterprise, and as to how exactly education interacts with other factors to produce new speakers, i.e. personal, social, linguistic, family factors? The Celtic languages offer a unique context to study of these issues, given their linguistic, geographical and cultural proximity, but also owing to the variation in education provisions in each setting. These questions are ripe for investigation in future collaborations by participants in this event.

2. New speaker variation and perceptions of new speaker varieties

New speakers worldwide have frequently been demonstrated to display innovative linguistic features, forms and practices in their linguistic production. These practices have often subsequently been subject to criticism and derision from others and even from new speakers themselves. This phenomenon has been attested in minority languages, just as it has been in more dominant languages. Thus, new speakers often diverge from traditional, 'native'-like linguistic practices and their linguistic production has been perceived as lacking legitimacy, authenticity and correctness. Papers presented at the Symposium illustrated that innovative linguistic practices are common amongst new speakers of the Celtic languages and that they are duly evaluated by 'native' and by new speakers alike. The nature of these innovations and of these subjective assessments was also described by participants. A striking aspect of these data was the fashion in which some 'deviant' linguistic features that are common amongst new speakers seem to be more salient to interlocutors than do other 'deviant forms used by new speakers, and some forms seem to grate more on the ears more than others. That is to say that some features that do not conform to traditional norms attract negative attention, while others pass without comment. Because the perception of new speaker speech varieties can provide a barrier to cohesion within an already limited pool of speakers, this point merits attention. It is not clear how sociolinguistic factors cause negative associations to become attached to some features of new speaker speech in the Celtic languages, while others don't become indexed in this way. This is amongst the avenues for future research that emerges from this event. The situation of the Celtic languages provides a chance to engage with the emergence of new speech varieties and the ways that they are perceived by users of the languages. The investigation of these issues across the Celtic varieties would represent a valuable step towards comprehending the divisions that inevitably surface with the presence of new speakers. This would be an important contribution not only to the Celtic languages, but also to sociolinguistics more generally.

Conclusions & Outcomes

It became clear from discussions throughout the event that although the Celtic languages share a common linguistic derivation, the circumstances of each of the languages are quite different. Notable differences emerged in relation to, for example, the official status of the languages, the educational provisions for the languages, and the levels of community support for the languages. Subsequently, it is noted that while the experiences of new speakers across the Celtic varieties share common features, each sociolinguistic context in which the Celtic languages operate has its own nuances and idiosyncrasies. The obstacles and barriers faced by new speakers, therefore, are context-specific. While this is a challenge to the development of models of new speaker research that are based solely on common linguistic histories, it offers an opportunity for researchers to engage with the myriad sociolinguistic factors that allow new

speakers to emerge and develop. This is an important consideration in any research endeavour involving new speakers of the Celtic languages.

The Symposium offered an opportunity to address the aims and objectives outlined above and a number of concrete short and medium term goals have been identified, particularly in relation to the theme of new speaker language varieties and perceptions of new speaker language varieties. It was decided that, as many of the participants who presented on this area at the Symposium have submitted a paper to the International Symposium on Bilingualism (ISB 11) 2017 in Limerick, Ireland, that a meeting should take place during that event in order to coordinate future activities. The aim for the meeting will be to identify opportunities for further funding for research and seminars in this area and to begin discussions in relation to a proposal for a journal special issue based on papers presented at the Symposium in Trinity College Dublin and/or at ISB 11 in Limerick. In particular, the possibility of preparing an application to the Irish Research Council's 'Knowledge Exchange' call for funding 2017 will be discussed. These activities will allow us to further develop research on new speakers of the Celtic languages, but with a particular emphasis on the varieties practised by new speakers and the perception of the ways that new speakers use the Celtic languages.

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References

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