

# **Articulating Minority Language Value in Diverse Communities: The Case of Compulsory Irish Language Education**

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## **Abstract**

In newly multilingual communities, where the language of education can no longer be assumed to be the home language of students, debates around language education policy can reflect broader sociocultural and political assumptions. As Ireland has become increasingly diverse in recent decades, the core compulsory status of the Irish language has emerged as one of the most contested aspects of the national curriculum. Informed by the field of language ideology, this paper draws on the responses to a public consultation on exemptions from the study of Irish. The findings point to a deeply entrenched polarisation of opinion regarding the relationship between identity and language, with some evidence of ethnocentric beliefs. However, the analysis also offered a number of nuanced and counterintuitive perspectives as to how minority languages might be positioned to contribute to a more open and inclusive educational environment.

## **Keywords**

Irish; minority language; diversity; language value; curriculum

## **Introduction**

In diverse communities across international contexts, curriculum can become a site of contestation in education as policymakers attempt to balance inclusion and cohesion. Tensions may arise around which perspectives and voices are valued and heard and, by contrast, which are excluded (Banks, 2014; Garcia-Huidobro, 2018). Within these debates, the issue of language education can become particularly fraught. The presence of minority and heritage languages in such contexts brings added complexity, leading to increased debate around the perceived merits of assimilation, integration or interculturalism (McCubbin, 2010).

This paper takes the role of the Irish language in the school curriculum as a lens through which to explore the relationship between language and identity in a newly diverse society. While Irish (Gaelic) is the first official language in the Republic of Ireland, it has long been a minority language relative to the other official language, English, and the number of native speakers continues to decline (Ó Giollagáin, 2016). In recent decades, Ireland's population has become increasingly diverse, with a shift to net inward migration in the late 1990s after decades of sustained outward migration (McGinnitty et al., 2018). This has contributed to a rapid growth in linguistic diversity. For example, the number of residents indicating they spoke a home language other than English or Irish increased by 19% between the 2011 census and the 2016 census (CSO, 2017). In this context, the core status of Irish in both the national primary curriculum (age 4-11) and second-level curriculum (age 12-18), already a point of tension, has become increasingly contested. Indeed, the compulsory study of Irish in schools is positioned by some as a barrier to the emergence of a more open and inclusive educational environment (Ó Laoire, 2012; O'Sullivan et al., 2019). A public consultation on amending the criteria for exemptions from the compulsory study of Irish was commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills [DES] and carried out by the authors in 2018/19. There were over 11,000 responses to the consultation survey and the findings indicated tentative support for the amendment.

However, many of the responses submitted to the consultation extended beyond the scope of the policy change in question and encompassed topics such as heritage, immigration, globalisation, and national identity. This paper adopts the assumption that debates around language are not only about language 'but are socially situated and tied to questions of identity and power in societies' (Blackledge, 2008, p. 30). Thus, a language ideology framework was used to revisit the data, with a specific focus on interpreting the respondents' perspectives on the relationship between language and identity. Within this framework, concepts such as language essentialism (the idea of language as tied to particular ethnic or cultural identities) and language value (the idea that languages carry differing forms of symbolic or utility value) informed the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

The next section gives some background on relevant aspects of the Irish context for an international readership. Section three provides an overview of the conceptual and

theoretical framework, section four outlines the methods, and the subsequent sections present the key findings. The discussion of the findings offers some insight into how minority languages might be framed in contemporary discourses on internationalisation and suggests that, rather than being positioned as a threat, increased linguistic and cultural diversity can have the potential to play a positive role in the revitalisation of minority languages (Bruen & Kelly, 2016). The paper concludes with some observations on tensions emerging from the data and makes recommendations for further research.

## **Background**

While the Irish language was an important marker of cultural identity in the campaign for independence preceding the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, it was not widely spoken. This was a result of a long period of language shift from Irish to English during British colonial rule. Following independence, the education system became a key site of language revitalisation efforts and Irish was made a compulsory subject in the national primary curriculum. However, attempts to reverse language shift were hampered by factors such as high outward migration and economic disadvantage in regions with active speakers. In the 2016 census, 1,761,420 people (39.8% of the population) indicated that they could speak some Irish. The census question on ability to speak Irish was a binary option (yes/no) therefore it is unclear what level of fluency this indicates. However, in a follow-up question on the frequency of usage only 73,803 people indicated that they spoke Irish daily outside the education system (Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2017), suggesting that the 39.8% figure does not necessarily correspond to active speakers. Of the active daily speakers, the majority are to be found in predominantly rural regions called the “Gaeltacht” along the western seaboard (Ó Giollagáin, 2014), although pockets of speakers can be found in some urban areas, particularly linked to educational or cultural sites (Walsh, 2019). In recent years, there has been a significant growth in Irish-medium schools, including in areas where the language has not had a strong presence, such as in Dublin, the capital city (Parsons & Lyddy, 2016). As of 2018, 8.1% of primary students and 3.6% of second-level students attended Irish-medium schools (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2019). An increasing recognition of the specific needs of learners in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools has led to policy initiatives such as the introduction of an L1 Irish language curriculum with a particular emphasis on literacy development, an area research has shown

to be problematic in terms of supporting intergenerational language transmission (Ó Laoire & Harris, 2006).

However, alongside these developments in Irish-medium education, there are ongoing calls to make the language optional in English-medium education (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Dhonnabháin, 2017; O'Brien, 2019). The rationale put forward for this includes both the increasing cultural diversity of the Irish population and the increasingly diverse range of abilities in mainstream classrooms as a result of improvements in inclusion for children with additional educational needs. Prior to 2019, exemptions from the study of Irish were only available in particular circumstances, such as in the case of a diagnosis of a Specific Learning Disability based on an assessment by a psychologist. In response to a growth in applications for exemptions (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2018), the DES commissioned the public consultation from which this paper is drawn. More detail on the consultation can be found in the methodology section below.

## **Literature review**

### ***Minority language rights and language essentialism***

The literature on minority language rights raises a number of issues pertinent to the question of the Irish language. A key concept here is language essentialism, which points to the complexity of the relationship between language and identity. Examples abound whereby language is positioned as a core element of a particular group's identity and is inextricably linked to territorial and ethnic claims to that particular identity. The understanding of language as an essential part of the collective identity of ethnic or cultural groups has been highly effective in campaigning for rights for speakers of minority languages (e.g., Lacroix, 2014; May, 2003; McCubbin, 2010).

However, shifts in the understanding of identity in both academic and public discourse pose a challenge to these identity-based arguments. There is growing recognition that group identity is not fixed and immutable but rather a fluid and permeable construct. Similarly, rather than an individual having one core or essential identity, it is increasingly widely accepted that identity is an active and ongoing process of construction (Bamberg et al., 2011). Language, in this understanding, is no longer seen as a defining marker of an

unchanging and essential identity but rather as only one of many aspects of identity construction (May, 2003).

As language essentialism becomes less tenable as a position, the claim of a particular ethnic or cultural group to ownership of a language and, relatedly, to rights associated with that language becomes more complex. The move away from an essentialist view of the relationship between language and identity becomes particularly relevant in contexts where historically monocultural regions or states undergo a demographic shift towards a more diverse population, as has been the case in Ireland in the last two decades (McGinnity et al., 2018). In these contexts, questions of language ownership lead also to questions of authority and prestige, as tensions arise around who gets to claim “authentic” identification with the language (Faez, 2011). Research in the Irish context has highlighted how the shifting proportions of native speakers and L2 speakers of Irish has “given rise to some contested spaces regarding authenticity, accuracy and ownership of the language” (Nic Fhlannchadha & Hickey, 2018, p. 38). These struggles over authenticity and ownership can emphasise the identification of particular communities with the language based on a shared sense of territorial and cultural belonging (Ó Laoire, 2012; O’Rourke, 2011).

However, this claim to language ownership through a shared history, while it may serve to deepen identification with a minority language, does not necessarily translate to increased use of the language. Indeed, the association of a language with specific heritages and traditions can take on a romantic or mythologised character, particularly in the case of a minority language that exists alongside a more dominant majority language. This issue is raised by Lacroix (2014) in her description of how an “affective attachment” to the Basque language acts primarily as a “symbolic possession,” signifying “belonging to a Basque us” (p. 78, translation authors’ own). She argues that this actually overshadows the primary communicative function of the language. Furthermore, this use of language as a marker of group belonging can implicitly (or explicitly) exclude those who do not share a common heritage.

Limiting the boundaries of a minority language community in this way can have negative effects in terms of its prestige relative to majority languages. An insistence on an ethnically essentialist view of language can even hamper language revitalisation efforts, particularly in contexts where the wider community does not share a heritage-based “affective

attachment” to a minority language. McCubbin’s (2010) argument here is particularly relevant to the Irish case: “ethnically essentialist policies can contribute to the marginalisation of minority languages by stripping them of their perceived utility in increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural contexts” (p. 460).

### ***Language ideology***

Approaching the question of minority language rights from these angles draws attention to the political and socio-cultural forces at work where two or more languages co-exist and highlights how processes of language shift are reflective of broader struggles in societies around power, identity, and status (Blackledge, 2008). Language ideology offers a useful theoretical perspective here. Understood as a “site of interaction between language behaviour and larger social systems and inequalities” (King, 2000, p. 169), language ideology brings into focus the manner in which language attitudes and practices reflect broader societal tensions and issues. These are often influenced by perceptions of status and identity, which in turn may be linked to issues of unequal power distribution (Warren, 2011). Examining a site of linguistic tension from a language ideology perspective can help to unpack the sociocultural and political beliefs underlying statements about language. Armstrong (2012) positions language ideology as a useful analytical lens through which to interrogate language shifts because it includes the social and practice elements of language use, rather than just a structuralist element that considers speakers based purely on ability. He offers a definition of language ideology as

a constellation of beliefs, attitudes and social norms, often concerned with the connection between language and identity or ethnicity, but also with reference to ontology, epistemology, history, politics, language structure and language use (p. 152)

While there are variations within the literature, this definition encompasses the principal aspects of language ideology and was adopted as a working definition in analysing the findings of this study.

One of the key recommendations made by Fishman (1991) from a language ideology perspective is that, in contexts where language revitalisation is being attempted, there is often a need for “ideological clarification.” This is because, particularly in the case of endangered or minority languages, there can be contradictions between people’s expressed

language attitudes and actual language behaviours. It may likely be the case that there are multiple perspectives within a revitalisation movement and that some of these perspectives may hold differing or even competing ideological views towards the language. In order for language revitalisation to have some chance of success, it is necessary that clarity is sought around language attitudes and behaviours (Hogan-Brun, 2006). In the Irish context, “sociolinguistic studies of Irish have found that despite holding high opinions of Irish, few individuals are willing to speak the language regularly and even fewer consistently use the language with their children at home” (King, 2000, p. 167). This is a clear example of a disparity between language attitudes and behaviours and it is likely that a failure to seek ideological clarification in this context will impede the success of any policies aimed at language revitalisation.

### ***Symbolic and instrumental language value***

Language ideology is closely tied up with ideas around language prestige, that is, whether a language is perceived to have prestige and, if so, what form that prestige takes. According to Cortés-Conde (1994), “[s]tudies of language maintenance or shift deal with situations in which the language enduring either of these processes is of a lower prestige” (p. 25). The Irish context is perhaps quite particular when viewed from this perspective because the perception of prestige depends on the level of analysis. At an official level the language has seemingly high prestige and has done so since the foundation of the state almost 100 years ago. For example, it is the first national language in the constitution and has compulsory status in the education system. Despite this apparent institutional prestige, however, its prestige at a social and individual level is more complex, as attested to by the declining number of native speakers and the disparity between language attitudes and language behaviours (Ó Giollagáin, 2016; Mac Giolla, 2012).

The concept of language value is a useful lens through which to understand this complexity in the perception of Irish. The literature on language ideology shows that, while it may be the case in terms of language attitudes that a language is valued by a particular group, that group’s language behaviours can vary greatly depending on whether the language is perceived as having symbolic value or instrumental value (May, 2003; Safran & Liu, 2012). A minority language may be positioned as having significant symbolic value in terms of culture and heritage and may represent an important point of common affective connection for the

language community in question. However, if the language in question does not also have utility or instrumental value, its high symbolic value may not translate into active language use. Instrumental or utility value is taken here to mean that a language can be used in a number of contexts and that there are potential benefits to acquiring the language, for example, personally, socially, and in the workplace (Emerine Hicks, 2017).

An over-emphasis on the symbolic value of a language can hamper attempts at its revitalisation. Armstrong (2012), discussing the case of Irish, points out that, “[i]n the main, activists campaign for the revitalization of a threatened and lesser-used language like Irish because its continued acquisition and use is connected to an important identity” (p. 159). This has long been, and continues to be, one of the key pillars of support in the argument for maintaining support for the revitalisation of Irish, reflected in popular slogans such as “tír gan teanga, tír gan anam” [a country without a language, a country without a soul]. However, this symbolic value is linked to a sociocultural identity that is becoming, arguably, less tangibly relevant to contemporary Irish people, given that the population has become more diverse in recent decades (McGinnity et al., 2018), while the economy and society have become more globalised and outward-looking (Coulter, 2018). In contexts such as these, as McCubbin (2010) points out “[e]mbedding the logic of support for Irish and other autochthonous minority languages in group identity terms serves to naturalise their perceived lack of utility” (p. 462). Thus, unless a complementary form of value is claimed for the language, its revitalisation based solely on symbolic value remains uncertain.

Of course, it is rarely the case that there is a commonly accepted interpretation of language value. There may be groups who perceive a particular language as having both symbolic and instrumental values, as having more one than the other, or even as having neither. These disparate views may co-exist within the same linguistic context, as is the case with many minority languages. The complexity of the perceptions of language value in relation to the Irish language came through strongly in the responses to this study and the discussion of the findings will draw on the concepts of symbolic and instrumental value to illustrate this complexity.

## **Methods**



The questions framing the consultation sought the public's responses to a proposed change in the policy on exemption from the compulsory study of Irish, specifically the amendment of the criteria under which an exemption could be availed of. The survey was designed by the DES and the analysis was carried out by the authors, all lecturers in a university school of education, two of whom work in the area of Irish-medium education and two of whom do not. A mixed methods approach was adopted and data was collected via an online survey housed on a commercial provider that was compliant with EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements. The survey was open from 7th December 2018 to 18th January 2019. A link to the survey was available on the DES website and it was available in Irish and English. A request for written submissions, which appeared alongside information pertaining to the survey on the DES website, offered respondents the opportunity to comment on the proposed policy change in detail. The survey was publicised through media channels, stakeholder organisations, formal and informal networks and by word of mouth. The online survey comprised of sections which explored the following topics: demographic information of participants, the circumstances in which a student may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish, the age at which exemptions should be considered, circumstances for the exemption of students with significant/persistent learning difficulties, exemptions in special schools and special classes, and general comments on the revised policy. A combination of question types was utilised in the survey, ranging from closed-ended Likert scales to open-ended responses. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

A total of 11,109 participants completed the online survey. This was the largest response to date to a public consultation by the DES. 56.8% of the total sample reported that they were parents, 40.9% reported that they were teachers, 16.5% reported that they were students, and 11.2% reported that they were in the "other" category.<sup>1</sup> The average response rate for the closed-ended questions was 62%, compared to a 12% response rate for the open-ended questions. The majority of participants (95.3%, n = 10,587) chose to respond in English.

In addition, a total of 149 written submissions were received. Of these 24 were submitted by organisations from the following stakeholder groups: parents, the teaching profession, university sector, Irish language sector, and disability/special needs sector. The remaining 125 written submissions came from individuals, who did not identify themselves as

representing any particular organisation or stakeholder group. While 15 of these individuals indicated that they were parents and 35 that they were teachers, they were writing in an individual capacity (as opposed to the submissions which were formally submitted by parent organisations and teacher organisations). The remaining 75 individuals did not provide any details on their identity categories. Thirty-three of the written submissions were in Irish.

The responses to the closed-ended questions (i.e. the quantitative data) were examined using descriptive statistics and analysis was supported by the IBM SPSS Version 25. The open-ended responses and written submissions (i.e. the qualitative data) were analysed independently and collectively by the four authors using a systematic and inductive categorical approach (Schreier, 2012) which was facilitated by NVivo 12 software. Analysis followed a recursive process consisting of the following steps: familiarisation with the dataset, line-by-line coding, organisation of codes into emerging categories, and lastly, re-organisation into final broad categories. Care was taken to ensure internal homogeneity within categories, and external heterogeneity among categories.

The findings of the consultation were written up in the form of a report to the DES2 (Flynn et al., 2019). The scope of the responses was, however, far wider than the policy change that was the subject of the DES report. Thus, following publication of the report, the authors revisited the study data with a view to further interrogating some of the findings. The data that had been categorised within the emergent themes of identity and culture, inclusive education, and curriculum was further sub-coded so that nuances and complexities could be drawn out. In order to bring particular attention to the intersections of language and identity, a language ideology lens was adopted here using the concepts in Armstrong's definition cited above as a guide (Armstrong, 2012, p. 152). This approach to revisiting data using a different conceptual lens was informed by Thomson and Pennacchia (2016, p. 625), who adopted a Foucauldian lens to revisit data they had collected for a report on alternative education.

## **Results**

Respondents were asked to give their views on a change in the criteria for exemption that represented a movement away from an "expert"-led diagnostic model to a needs-based model to be applied at a local level through consultation with principals, teachers, parents

and pupils in English-medium mainstream and special schools. There were seven changes proposed in the criteria. The quantitative data indicated that the proportion of respondents in favour of the changes ranged from 56% to 75%.<sup>3</sup> However, this suggested that there was a substantial minority not in favour of these changes, particularly when the quantitative data was brought alongside the qualitative data from the written submissions, where there was a unanimous view that the proposed changes were not a satisfactory solution to the question of exemptions from Irish. The qualitative data suggested that respondents viewed the question of compulsory Irish as being too multifaceted and complex to be resolved through this policy change alone. For example, a number of respondents queried the binary nature of the exemptions process (i.e. that one either did or did not study Irish) and suggested that there were alternative ways to approach the question, for example, by giving students the option of learning the spoken language but not sitting for examinations.

Responses to the open-ended questions and to the request for written submissions went beyond the particular policy change in question (which was subsequently enacted in August 2019) and reflected on the curriculum more broadly, on language learning in general, on the status of Irish in society, and on questions of identity, ethnicity, and heritage. This section draws on the analysis of this wide-ranging qualitative data rather than the data specifically focused on the policy change. The findings are presented below using “symbolic language value” and “instrumental language value” as orienting concepts. These concepts offer a helpful way to frame the opposing positions taken in the responses as to the value of Irish in contemporary Ireland. We draw also on theories of language essentialism and language ideology to help unpack the interpretations of language value, and these ideas are interwoven through the presentation and discussion of the findings.

### ***The symbolic value of Irish***

The responses to the consultation reflected polarised attitudes towards the role of the Irish language in the education system, a finding that was not unexpected given the long-standing and entrenched nature of debates around the status of Irish in society (Mac Giolla, 2012). Arguments ranged along a spectrum, from the position that Irish should be compulsory for all students, irrespective of back-ground or ability, to the position that Irish should not be taught at all in the education system and should be a home language for those who choose to speak it. The justifications given to support this range of beliefs were

varied in their level of nuance. Interestingly, however, respondents from every point along the spectrum of attitudes mobilised similar concepts to articulate their arguments. These concepts include identity, heritage, rights, and values. The language ideology lens adopted in revisiting the data offers a way of unpacking the mobilisation of these concepts.

A dominant theme throughout the data was the positioning of the Irish language as a central marker of what it means to “be Irish.” Being able to read, understand, and use the language was linked to having an Irish identity and “being Irish.” The compulsory status of the language was defended on the basis of its symbolic value, with references to culture, heritage, and history (particularly the history of colonisation):

Irish is the most important aspect of our heritage and culture and everything else that we have as a nation has stemmed from this. The fact that our unfortunate history tried so many times to rid us of our cherished language makes it all the more important to us. (Individual 4 14)

Our language is an integral component and mode of expression of our national and cultural identity. (Respondent 5 4741)

From a language ideology perspective, where statements and beliefs about language act as an indicator of underlying sociocultural assumptions, the placing of this type of high symbolic value on the Irish language suggests that Irishness is closely bound up with a shared cultural heritage. The foregrounding of the language’s symbolic value operates to set boundaries around “Irishness” and suggests that the compulsory study of the language should be a route to integration for those who do not share this particular cultural heritage. For example, in response to the question of granting exemptions from the study of Irish, respondents state:

Never, it is our heritage, culture and native language. For those who wish to reside in the state the law should make it clear that it is a statutory requirement to learn our native language. (Respondent 5413)

No exemptions should be granted. Irish is our national language and should be a compulsory subject for anyone who wishes to study within the Irish curriculum (Respondent 5840)

However, many respondents strongly disagreed with the compulsory status of Irish, and some felt that this signalled an underlying lack of respect and appreciation for ethnic

diversity within the State. Numerous respondents challenged the stereotypical notions of the “Catholic, white and Gaelic” student (Parker-Jenkins & Masterson, 2013), and emphasised the multicultural and ethnically diverse reality of the nation and the school system:

The Irish Citizen no longer fits into the boxes that once contained them and this must be reflected in the choices that are made available. (Organisation 6 Parent 02)

Over the years I have encountered and shared the struggles and frustrations of migrant/newcomer students who, under current regulations, are forced to study Irish in secondary school against their will and against the will of their parents/guardians. (Individual 23)

Resentment is growing amongst the international community [in Ireland] for forcing Irish on non-Irish children who are often already bilingual living in a foreign country a modern inclusive society should be respectful of other cultures. (Respondent 350)

As is pointed out in the research literature, foregrounding a heritage-based symbolic value can lead to a static and ethnically essentialist view of a language community, which limits any transferability of the language’s value. In the context of many responses to this study, this meant that positioning the language as having high symbolic value to a particular cultural group, the ethnically Irish, worked simultaneously to position the language as having little or no symbolic value to those who did not share the same cultural or ethnic background. As has been argued in the literature, this type of double positioning can ultimately be detrimental to a minority language’s survival, setting boundaries at once around the language’s speakers *and* the language’s value.

Interestingly, not all respondents who mobilised the high symbolic value of Irish to defend its compulsory status equated symbolic value with a static ethnic essentialism. A number of responses, particularly among those to the request for written submissions, argued that studying the language should be seen not as an exclusionary mechanism but rather as a route to inclusion and community.

Tá deis an teanga a úsáid le cabhrú leo [scoláirí] meas a fhorbairt ar mhionlaigh, ar chultúir eile chomh maith len í a úsáid le féiniúlacht chomónta a spreagadh.<sup>7</sup> (Respondent 10879)

*There is an opportunity here to use the language to help them [pupils] to develop respect for minorities, for other cultures as well as to use it to promote a common identity.*

The respondents who argued for this expanded view of the language's symbolic value explicitly disavowed an ethnically essentialist position, maintaining that an intercultural approach to the curriculum was needed, which would emphasise the spoken language and place it as one of many languages and cultures in a newly diverse Ireland. The proponents of this argument indicated that the only route to survival for the language was by opening up ownership and authority over the language to "new speakers" (Soler & Darquennes, 2019) and to students of all backgrounds, allowing the language itself to take on new forms of value and meaning, while also offering a sense of connection to the past.

Tá níos mó i gceist le teanga ná méan cumarsáide agus stórfocal. Is eispéireas saol atá ann a thugann luachanna daonna, spiorad agus anam do dhuine. Ní "táirge" scolaíochta ná oideachas atá ann. Is bealach saoil é, ní miste i ré agus costas na pleanála teanga go mbeadh deis ag gach saoránach agus na Gaeil nua as tíortha eile chuile dheis a bheith acu an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim agus a chleachtadh. (Respondent 10744)

*[A language is more than a means of communication and a vocabulary. It is a lived experience that gives human values, spirit and soul to a person. It is not a "product" of schooling or education. It is a way of life, it is essential in the scope and budget of language planning that every citizen and the new Irish from other countries should have every opportunity to learn and to practice Irish.]*

Is tír ilchultúrtha í Éire anois. Ba cheart don Roinn a bheith sásta Gaeilge a chéiliúradh agus a chur chin [sic] cinn. Bíonn na daoine ag teacht isteach ó áiteanna cosúil le Polainn, an Ghearmáin, an Liotuáin lán sásta Gaeilge a fhoghlaim. Tuigeann siadsan cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an teanga dhúchais. (Individual 10)

*[Ireland is now a multicultural country. The Department should be happy to celebrate and promote Irish. People coming in from places like Poland, Germany, Lithuania are more than happy to learn Irish. They understand how important a heritage/native language is]*

Somewhat counterintuitively, this position was most common among those whose responses were in Irish or who identified themselves as active Irish speakers, while the more ethnically essentialist position appeared to be more commonly held by people who either identified as non-Irish speakers or as people who had learned Irish in school but no longer

actively spoke it. Respondents were not required to indicate whether or not they spoke Irish, thus it cannot be argued that these positions are representative of all speakers or non-speakers. However, the responses provided through Irish did suggest a common perspective within this group that the value of Irish could extend beyond a symbolic value associated only with heritage and tradition. Indeed, the degree to which the arguments made in the Irish-language responses echoed each other was striking, particularly given that there was much more heterogeneity in the English-language responses. This disparity between the language beliefs and practices of various groups in the same community is an example of the complexity of language ideology in the Irish context. The next section will unpack this complexity further through the lens of instrumental language value, a concept that operated alongside, and sometimes in opposition to, symbolic value in the study data.

### ***The instrumental value of Irish***

The interpretations of the instrumental value of Irish that emerged from the study data can be arranged into three broad groups. The first group considered the language to have no instrumental value, the second characterised it as having limited instrumental value and a third group argued for an expanded view of its *potential* instrumental value.

The first group, those who viewed the language as having little to no instrumental value, tended to argue that it should be either abolished entirely from the curriculum or at least made non-compulsory. Responses in this group did not necessarily disavow the language's symbolic value but the respondents signalled their belief that Irish lacks instrumental value in everyday life. Perhaps as a result of such perceptions, some participants believed more time should be spent learning other subjects that would be more useful in the modern workplace:

A language is like a currency, insisting on using Irish is like insisting on carrying around punts in your wallet on the off chance you might find a shop where you can spend them. It died, please let it rest in peace. (Respondent 2672)

Mandating Irish in schools (especially up to leaving cert) is handicapping our children in the global job market. (Respondent 6221)

The second group, while not discounting the language's instrumental value entirely, tended to position this value as only being relevant in the national sphere, that is, within Ireland.

This limited form of instrumental value was associated with symbolic value and linked the language's use value to domains associated with Irish culture and heritage, such as the arts and media. Access to certain professions was also highlighted as an example of the language's instrumental value within Ireland, where it is an entry requirement for employment in sectors such as primary school teaching, the police, and some sections of the civil service, due to a constitutional requirement that citizens should be able to access and interact with state services through the official language of their choice (Irish or English). Some respondents suggested making the language optional for those who wished to enter those careers:

Let it be retained as an optional subject for those who want to become Irish or primary school teachers or those who require it for civil service jobs. (Individual 49)

However, it was also pointed out that making a child exempt from studying Irish in early primary school could inadvertently limit their future career options:

Maidir le díolúine a thabhairt do pháistí chomh hóg le 6, tá cinntí tromchúiseacha á ndéanamh do thodhchaí an pháiste sin. Ní bheidh deis ag an dalta céim sa bhunoideachas a bhaint amach in Éirinn ná réimse cúrsaí eila a dhéanamh a bhaineann leis an nGaeilge. (Respondent 261)

*[As regards giving an exemption to children as young as 6, there are far-reaching decisions being made for that child's future. That child won't have the opportunity to take a degree in primary teaching in Ireland or to do a range of other courses that relate to Irish.]*

A further argument was that this entry requirement should be abolished altogether as it served to exclude those without the language from employment in those sectors. O'Sullivan et al. (2019) also make this case strongly in their research on underrepresented groups in initial teacher education.

The third group, perhaps due to recognition that neither emphasis on the symbolic value of Irish nor on its use value within the national sphere was enough to ensure its relevance in contemporary Ireland, mobilised arguments that claimed an expanded instrumental value for the language. The responses that fit within this grouping explicitly positioned the language in a European context, highlighting its official status as a language of the EU and



the associated employment opportunities, and pointing to EU policy on multilingualism as justification for retaining its core status:

Ní mór a chur san áireamh freisin go bhfuil fostaíocht mhaith ardghradaim le fáil anois sa nGaeilge, in Éirinn agus san Aontas Eorpach, agus dá réir sin go gceilfí deiseanna suntasacha amach anseo ar dhaoine óga dá gcoinneofaí an Ghaeilge uathu ag an leibhéal is airde sa gcóras bun- agus meánoideachais. (Organisation Irish 05)

*[It should also be noted that there is now good, high-calibre employment available with Irish, in Ireland and in the European Union, and thus young people would be denied significant opportunities in the future if higher-level Irish is kept from them in the primary and post-primary education systems.]*

Plurilingual competence, “Mother tongue + 2,” is the European Union’s language education objective, and the relationship between the status of Irish, as a heritage tongue and as a second language, and the status of languages in general within the Irish education system, has long been identified. (Organisation University 04)

These respondents critique the argument that time spent on Irish in schools would be better spent learning other languages, drawing on research on transferable language skills to support their position:

Along with English, the inclusion of both languages as core subjects in national curricula gives language learning and the advantages of bilingualism a particular status in the learning experience of students. (Organisation Teacher 01)

De réir taighde idirnáisiúnta, tá buntáistí suntasacha cognaíocha ag roinnt le staidéar a dhéanamh ar an dara teanga, agus dá réir sin is buntáiste oideachasúil agus intleachtúil don scoláire staidéar a dhéanamh ar an nGaeilge go dtí leibhéal na hArdteiste. (Organisation Irish 05)

*[According to international research, there are significant cognitive benefits associated with studying a second language, and thus it confers an educational and intellectual advantage on students to study Irish to the level of the Leaving Certificate.]*

Some respondents draw attention also to how promoting the benefits of multilingualism is a key element of the national strategy on foreign languages in education, Languages Connect 2017–2026 (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2017) and argue that the core status of Irish in the curriculum can contribute to this strategy. Indeed, one of the explicit

recommendations in many of these responses was a call for a “public awareness campaign,” which would inform the public of the cognitive benefits of bi- and multilingualism in the context of internationalisation. Smith-Christmas and NicLeòid (2020) draw attention to a similar campaign in the Scottish context emphasising the instrumental value of Scots Gaelic.

Maybe if we discussed its [Irish] virtues as a cultural educational tool then more students would strive to learn it and not strive to find ways to use their difficulty to take easier paths.  
(Respondent 9762)

[Organisation] suggests that it would be helpful if the Department, drawing on the research to which it has access, and in the context of the Languages Connect strategy could continue to promote the advantages of bilingualism, particularly in terms of acquiring other languages at a time when the importance of language proficiency is increasingly appreciated.  
(Organisation University 03)

These moves highlight the ways in which, by positioning Irish in an international frame and by presenting evidence-based arguments on multilingualism, its perceived value can diversify and expand outwards. This works to counteract the assumption that the instrumental value of the language is tied to its symbolic value or that it is a fixed value.

### **Discussion—Language value: Static or fluid?**

The responses to the public consultation on exemptions from the study of Irish, the source of this data, can be read on one level as an example of a polarised debate on whether or not the study of a minority language should be compulsory for all students in mainstream schools. On another level, however, the responses can be read as an illustration of the process Fishman (1991) calls “ideological clarification,” whereby the tensions between different perceptions of the value of a language are brought into focus. The contested status of the Irish language plays out in the consultation responses through arguments around whether or not the language holds any instrumental value and, if it does, whether or not that instrumental value is limited in its scope. Other arguments, often by the same respondents, focus on its symbolic value and whether the form of symbolic value it lays claim to should ensure the protection of its compulsory status or whether it privileges a particular claim to Irishness that is exclusionary in today’s more diverse society

The main point of tension in these differing perceptions is perhaps the extent to which language value is considered to be static or fluid. Those respondents who predominantly emphasise the Irish language's high symbolic value are, through their responses, actively engaged in positioning the language as associated with a specific cultural heritage.

Interestingly, this positioning is apparent in responses that both support and oppose the compulsory status of the language. In other words, the symbolic value of Irish is used both as a rationale for abolishing it, due to its perceived irrelevance in instrumental terms, and also as a rationale for retaining it, due to its perceived significance in cultural terms. Either way, however, these types of rationales draw on a perception of the symbolic value of the language as fixed and unchanging, and as bound to a specific ethno-cultural group.

Perhaps in recognition of the limitations of this static view of symbolic value, we see a significant minority of respondents building a case for a more expansive interpretation of the language's value, claiming an inclusive and intercultural potential for it and rejecting the idea that students of white Irish backgrounds should hold any more ownership over it than students of other ethnic backgrounds. This move towards a more fluid perception of the language's symbolic value is made in many cases by respondents who identify themselves as being active speakers or as working in sectors related to the language. In tandem with the move to redefine the perceived symbolic value, these respondents also establish claims to a reimagined instrumental value for the language. Many of the respondents supporting the core status of Irish recognise that symbolic value without instrumental value is no guarantee of language survival and thus point to the importance of the language for further education and for certain careers within Ireland. Some respondents go a step further and make arguments that would expand the instrumental value of the language, both in terms of its use value on a European level and in terms of its educational value on a cognitive-linguistic value. Again, the language is positioned as having positive potential in an increasingly diverse and multilingual population.

## **Conclusion**

This paper offers an illustration of how a minority language community can draw on counter-intuitive claims and arguments to try to effect a shift in language ideology. There appears to be a recognition in some responses that, firstly, over-emphasising a heritage-based symbolic value risks slipping into ethnic essentialism and alienating Irish people who

do not necessarily identify with that heritage and, secondly, focusing on symbolic value actually increases the perception that the language lacks instrumental value in an increasingly heterogeneous society. Thus, respondents build a case for a more fluid and open interpretation of the language's symbolic value and a reimagined and more outward facing interpretation of its instrumental value. Further research into the various discursive and practical elements of this attempted shift in perception may prove instructive for minority language communities more widely, particularly in cases where "traditional speech communities must ideologically reinvent themselves [and] must find new value in their old language" (Armstrong, 2012, p. 161).

It should be pointed out, however, that many, though not all, of the respondents arguing for a more expansive view of the language were those who responded to the request for written submissions. The respondents to the online survey, whether they were for or against compulsory Irish, were more likely to hold more static views of the language and of the language community. This could be because of the more constrained response options available in the survey. However, it could also be because many of the written submissions were made by respondents linked to the Irish language and education sectors, either individually or as organisations, and there was a coherence and commonality of message across many of them that suggests a certain degree of co-ordination. This commonality of message was noted in all of the responses provided through Irish. We highlight this not to invalidate the argument but to suggest that it is possibly more representative of an invested and vocal minority than a majority of the respondents or, indeed, of the public.

It is, thus, impossible to know to what extent the inclusive and pro-diversity arguments made in those responses extend to everyday dispositions or actual language practices. While the model put forward by some respondents is, certainly, one that foregrounds an intercultural and internationalised language community, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that the majority of the responses, particularly those to the online survey, still drew on a more static and ethnically essentialist view of the language. Indeed, if we are to adopt a language ideology perspective, whereby statements about language are also about power and status, there is evidence of some troubling sociocultural and political assumptions in a number of responses. Respondents, in the guise of maintaining the language's survival, suggest, both implicitly and explicitly, that it is under threat from the

increasingly diverse demographics of contemporary Ireland. This points to underlying ethnocentric and racist beliefs not only around the Irish language but also around Irish identity more broadly. These beliefs, if left unchallenged, may be problematic in terms of social cohesion as they centre around the question of who is included and who is excluded from “Irishness.”

As argued by many respondents, schools in Ireland are no longer the monocultural sites they were long perceived to be. In this context, the compulsory study of the Irish language has the potential to either decrease or increase intercultural understanding, depending on how its value is positioned and interpreted. It is worth reiterating here that the original consultation was about one particular change to education policy. That there was such a large response, and that the responses went so far beyond the particular reform in question, is testament to the need for debate on the status of the Irish language in schooling. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer specific policy recommendations on the future role of Irish in the curriculum. However, it is clear that further research is needed to inform the direction of language education policy. Such research must include public consultation with a broader scope and wider remit than the study discussed in this paper, accompanied by an appropriate information campaign on the benefits of multilingualism. Informed debate of this sort could contribute to a process of ideological clarification around the value of the Irish language. It is crucial also that further research should examine the assumptions apparent in the responses to this study, explicitly bringing attention to the concerning presence of ethnocentric beliefs associated with the language and starting a conversation around what those beliefs mean for inclusion and equality in a diverse society.

## **Notes**

1. The total here is more than 100% because respondents could choose more than one category to define themselves (e.g., a respondent could be both parent and teacher).
2. The report is available open access on the DES website at the following link:  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e18caa-report-of-public-consultation-on-exemptions-from-the-study-of-irish/>.

3. It is outside the scope of this paper to provide a full discussion of the quantitative data, however this can be accessed in the consultation report at the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e18caa-report-of-public-consultation-on-exemptions-from-the-study-of-irish/>.

4. “Individual” indicates an individual’s submission to the invitation for written submissions.

5. “Respondent” indicates an anonymous respondent to the online survey.

6. “Organisation” indicates an organisation’s submission to the invitation for written submissions. These submissions are publicly available at <https://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Information/Irish-Exemption/submissions-to-public-consultation-irish-exemptions/?pageNumber=1>.

7. When quoting from a response or submission made in Irish, the original text is provided for transparency. The English translation is the authors’ own.

8. The punt was the unit of currency in Ireland before it adopted the euro.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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