

The language: from politics to culture to society marketed as environmentalism

Irish as ecology



By Liam Tiernach Ó Beagáin and Laoise Ní Fhearchair

Soul

PÁDRAIG PEARSE, the Irish revolutionary leader of 1916, declared “*Tír gan teanga, tír gan anam*,” which translates as “A country without its language is a country without a soul”. Certainly, by 1916 Ireland was a country that had lost its sense of self. Although acts of rebellion ultimately resulted in an independent state for roughly two-thirds of the island, much of what was hoped would be restored fell by the wayside.

The reasons for Ireland’s predicaments are, of course, historical. The sins of colonialism reach into contemporary Ireland still. What Ireland has become is an imitator of trends, as opposed to a nation certain of itself and its defining characteristics. What Pearse described as the country’s soul remains lost. This sense of loss predominates in us as a people since residing in Ireland’s language *Gaeilge* (Irish) lies much of our heritage. It’s a language most of us don’t know. The language is at the periphery of a nation dislocated from itself.

We discuss here how our currently unused language can help move us toward a psychologically healthier, more culturally rich and caring society, and in doing so end the alienation of a nation.

1. Contemporary Ireland: Neoliberalism, humans and superhumans

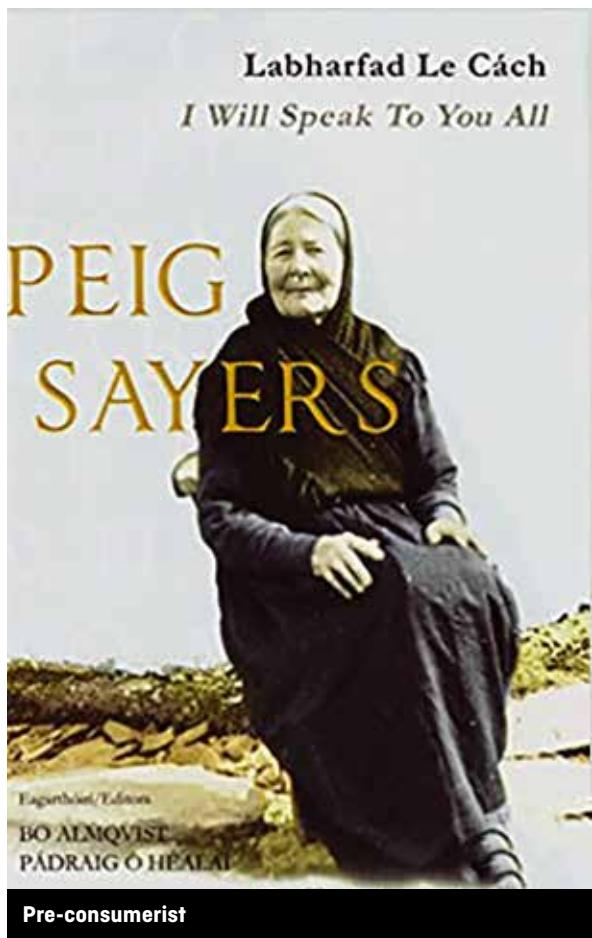
Today Ireland is haunted by colonialism, while a rampant capitalism perpetuates deference to outside ideologies that conflict with who we are as a people. Neoliberal ideology encourages the false neo-Darwinian belief that it’s sink or swim. One must outdo the other to ‘get ahead’. But always inherent in the Irish attitude to life is zeal for strength in unity: that we are all in this together and that we look out for one another. This is what we want, but it’s not what we have. On the one hand, massive tax-free profits are guaranteed for multi-billion dollar corporations that we will describe as *the superhumans*. While, on the other hand, little

is promised for us, *the humans*. Neoliberalism is winning the ideological battle. The Irish view of life is weakening. But it can be resuscitated by the gems held in our language.

Our culture is often mocked and belittled. The language is often demeaned. Viewing one language as superior to others is utterly rejected, indeed disdained, by contemporary linguistic theory but how often do we hear of contemptuous alienation from the simple pieties of the Leaving Certificate novel, ‘*Peig*’.

Modern life is full of this. The relentlessly driven ‘power-couple’ Vogue Williams and Spencer Matthews (we shall refer to them as “WM”) recently described *Gaeilge* as “an ugly language”. Ryanair, Ireland’s low-fares airline openly mocked the language when Irish speakers asked for an Irish-language option on its website, while 3 Mobile asks people with “difficult” Irish names to translate them into English.

Attitudes like these are not new. For example, the great Catholic emancipator and royalist Daniel O’Connell viewed *Gaeilge* as inferior to English.



Pre-consumerist

Some of these mind-sets towards Irish culture can be summarised in the following aphorism: *what was: inferior, what's now: superior*.

But it's an absolute myth.

What we currently have is an unsustainable greed machine built on a post-colonial porridge of waffle-ideology. Certainly, whatever of O'Connell, contemporary views such as WM are driven by the language of a specific individualism that, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche so despised ('On the pathos of truth', 1872) – one that Jean-Paul Sartre warned would lead us to an inauthentic life ('Being and Nothingness', 1943).

In buying into the view of life that the superhumans offer, the individual, believing themselves to be free, hands over responsibility for their lives to them. From a deontological perspective, the individual is but a means to an end, who is unknowingly used in acts of repulsion towards Kant's ethical demands and thus becomes the *amadán* or fool.

If a language not only represents societal concepts but also shapes them, in what the great linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) described as a nation's "*character of language*", then perhaps the language common in Ireland today (whatever its tongue might be) describes where our values lie.

Elite decisions appear to result in ever-greater choices for everyone. However, choices trend to what seem to be consumer-driven

demands, since these choices are agreeable with elite interests. Vacuous freedoms of choice in consumer purchases are illusions. Actual choices in other areas bear this point out, since there are little or no choices. Healthcare and housing are not easily available unlike, say, noodles.

Humans demand togetherness. For example we want affordable healthcare and housing and we want the superhumans to pay their fair share. However, this is not in the interest of the superhumans who are so neatly entwined with government. For example, over half of Ireland's TDs are millionaires tied to property and financial instruments (Philip Ryan and Wayne O'Connor, 'Revealed: Half of Ireland's TDs are Millionaires', *The Irish Independent*, 13 May 2018).

The cosiness between elites and TDs has been encouraged by successive Irish governments through tax-exemptions that allow the superhumans to buy up large swathes of housing, effectively barring the humans. What has resulted is another governmental crisis and is one that is best swept under the rug since such stories are not becoming in a media concerned with elite interests (the classic by Herman and Chomsky, 'Manufacturing Consent', 1988, explains why).

Real freedom is saved for persons seen to be of merit. Despite what their very own *mythos* would have us mere mortals believe, these superhuman entities are not signs of humanity

overcoming itself, but more than likely, if allowed to continue they are signs of humanity ending itself.

Let us focus on tax for a second. It is estimated that multinational corporations have avoided €1 trillion in taxes through what is known as the *Double Irish* tax loophole (Paul Mark, 'Ireland is the world's biggest corporate "tax haven", say academics', *Irish Times*, 13 June 2018).

Apple has been an egregious beneficiary of the *Double Irish*. While Ireland was still struggling under huge debts imposed after the financial crash, the government fought against the EU by refusing to draw down taxes from Apple. The European Competition Committee (ECC) found Apple had been given roughly €13 billion in illegal state aid through a sweetheart deal that spanned many years and ruled that they must return the money. The Irish government appealed on their behalf and won. What greater sign do we need of a country that is dislocated from itself?

Ireland is one of the worst performers in European assessments of the environment including carbon emissions and waste production. The Irish countryside is under pressure as small farmers are pushed to the edge of reason, rivers and ecological systems have been severely damaged by poor water management, while fisheries are near collapse and we are the least wooded country in Europe. Biodiversity is in precipitous decline and there is little popular or local heed.

And yet ecological thinking is at the heart of *Gaeilge*.

The Celts in Ireland were animists, honouring the spirit of nature. The Druids revered trees. Ireland is an international byword for beauty.



Animists in a works of beauty

The greenest country in the world, aesthetically. To say hello in Irish we say ‘*Cad é mar atá tú?*’ meaning, ‘What is because you are?’ Concern for others and nature is at the heart of the language. Even De Valera’s vision was rustic and bucolic in contrast to industrial England. Community and spirituality were central.

These are but a few observations. We have not discussed the ruination of other public services, the commodification of universities, and the general move to Anglo-American market fetishisation.

Across Ireland the arts, culture and language are beleaguered, while Irish language communities live with the very real threat of extinction under new planning laws that are unacceptable everywhere else in the state. Politicians talk of existential crises in economics, culture, housing, health, energy, and climate, but they pull in directions contrary to their alleged concerns. Capitalism is to blame for this madness.

To rid ourselves of this way of life we must reject its language, whatever tongue it uses, and reengage with who we actually are.

2. Why languages matter

We are not suggesting *Gaeilge* is exceptional, only that it has within it Ireland’s long and rich history. Within this history there lies a particular culture and within that an attitude to life, humanity and our role in the world. Under Imperial rule we forgot much of our culture, since “the colonial imperative is to destroy all memory of what went before” (Palmer, *et al*, ‘Enter Mac Morris’, *Dublin Review of Books*, July 2019). And as Michael Cronin eruditely suggests, the task of destroying all memory and erasing a culture requires getting rid of its language (*An Ghaeilge agus an Éiceolaíocht*, Foilseacháin Ábhair Spioradálta, 2019).

Language is the key component for a nation. As our first President, Douglas Hyde believed, by losing *Gaeilge* we lost “the world’s recognition of us as a separate nationality”. So although the Irish have no desire to be English, as with many colonised nations, we take up many of their customs. As Hyde observed, we imitate the Imperial *metropole* that forces the project of colonialism onto us. Today, we follow their sports, watch their soap operas, listen to their music, copy their fashion, and even follow their royalty. A renewed interest in our own ways through our own language can change this. Not in the enclosed nationalistic way that de Valera’s protectionist policies dictated, but in a way that is modern, secular, and democratic. The language reinvigorates a set of values truer to ourselves.

So far, we have argued we are alienated from ourselves. We are dislocated from our culture, ecology, geography, economics, and democracy. This is not surprising considering

the power we have lost as a nation.

For example, in losing *Gaeilge* we have lost our ability to place ourselves in our own country. We do not know the meaning of the place names around us. We are traumatically lost in a psyche living paradoxically. How can something be so familiar yet so unknowable? Since most place names were translated into English phonetically there is no meaning associated with Irish place names in their English form: they don’t denote anything meaningful in English. For example, we can’t tell you what the term Dublin means, since it has no meaning. A speaker of *Gaeilge* will know that the word Dublin is a bastardisation of the Irish words *dubh linn*. *Dubh* is the Irish word for black, and *linn* is pool in English. If *Dubh-linn* ought to be called anything in English it’s Blackpool.

Phonetic translations of meaningful Irish words prevail across the country. And this has had the consequence of confounding the problems we have with *Gaeilge*. Confusion reigns.

Again, Cronin expertly examines the malaise:

“For many, who have been born and grown up in Anglophone Ireland, the language can have a certain familiarity about it but, at the same time, remain disconcertingly strange. Disconcerting because of the assumption that it should come naturally, not require hours of ceaseless study and practice. This sensation of being unsettled, of being in an uncertain space (the endless soul-searching about Irish identity) can, of course, lead to resentful guilt or outright rejection”.

But that rejection is misplaced, since within indigenous cultures around the world there is “a great multitude of stories, some of which may be invaluable in the reinvention of self and

society in the transition to new ways of living and being” (Stibbe 2016: 193). Therefore, if we wish to reimagine our world and our place within it, *Gaeilge* must play a key role.

3. What can *Gaeilge* do?

James Connolly (1868–1916) led the Irish Citizens Army as part of the Irish rebellion against British imperial forces in 1916. Connolly was a republican socialist and knew the important role Ireland’s indigenous language had to play if Ireland was to be a successful post-colonial society that valued all individuals as ends in themselves, as opposed to mere cogs in an imperialist-capitalist machine that bled its colonies dry.

Douglas Hyde too, although not a socialist like Connolly, understood the importance of the Irish language. A person of Anglo-Irish descent and the first president of Ireland (1938–45), he spoke on the importance of decolonising Ireland (‘The necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland’, *Irish National Literary Society*, 25 November 1892).

Hyde understood that *Gaeilge* was the essential component in saving Irish ways of life in the arts, mythology, music, philosophy, and law. For example, many of Ireland’s ancient laws foreshadowed the advances gained by suffragettes in twentieth century England. In essence, Ireland’s culture lay in the heart of its native spoken word. Connolly’s vision for an all-inclusive socialist Ireland with its own language, however, was not to be. By the spring of 1916 the leaders of the new Ireland were dead, executed by British forces for their proclamation of an Irish republic.

What Connolly and Hyde understood about our native language holds true today. By extension, it follows that native languages around the world may give us opportunities to reintroduce ourselves to nature, and to stop the dislocation that Erich Fromm described as



giving to us our great sense of alienation ('The art of living', 1956).

Ireland has within its grasp the opportunity to show the rest of the world the way forward.

If we reintroduce *Gaeilge* as part of a multilingual society we are giving speakers of other languages an introduction to the history of Ireland.

4. Ways forward

The way forward can either be economics-led policies that satisfy superhuman needs, or it can be people-led with the interests of community at its heart. Successive Irish governments have failed. Therefore, we favour the humans taking control with funding taken out of government hands. But before discussing the humans let us look at the superhumans and government policy.

Government policies have been laughable at best. *Gaeilgeoirs* (Irish speakers) and the *Gaeltachts* (Official Irish language areas), see their latest variation on a theme, the *Official Language Bill*, as largely irrelevant. The idea of *Lá na Gaeilge* (Irish day) where everyone is encouraged to use their *cúpla focal* (few words) adds insult to injury. They are nothing more than mere platitudes towards a language that many wish would just go away (Lorna Siggins, 'Don't speak Irish, company that accepts Gaeltacht grant tells staff', *The Times*, 17 April 2021). The language bill points towards civic positions aimed at serving the Gaeltachts. But if the Gaeltachts aren't there, then there will be no job roles in public service.. If the government were serious about the language then they would put all available funds into making *Gaeilge* a living language.

But the opposite is happening. English is eroding the Gaeltachts. This trend does not appear to cause alarm for those in charge, and leaves many asking why do Gaeltacht bodies exist if they cannot do their one job? It seems that under government policy Gaeltachts are sacrifice zones comparable to how Naomi Klein described indigenous people and their cultures in the US ('This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus the Climate', 2014). Their lobbying power is too weak. Accordingly, with no voice, native Irish speakers in Irish speaking communities in Ireland are afforded little or no protection.

Under the guise of aiming to revive the Gaeltachts, government have proposed and are trying to enforce planning laws that no other part of the country would tolerate. They aim to build housing and introduce new members to the communities who don't have a word of Irish between them.

The grim reaper of *Gaeilge* is at the door and it is not the British but we who are doing it.

But even if *Gaeilge* were to somehow miraculously survive under these stresses

it is not impervious to the agenda of the individualism. As the decline of the Gaeltachts continue there is a move away from "cultural and community agency" that scholar Conchúr Ó Ciollagáin describes as "staged Irish" which is "decoupled from the Gaeltacht collective... The preference in current approaches [is] for the symbolic and institutional use of Irish. There is no expectation that policies would have any application in actual communities".

('Neo-liberal treatment of Irish language is folly', *Irish Times*, 17 August 2020). If this is allowed to continue, then the language itself will get dislocated from the culture. Irish is being decoupled from the cultural roots of the Gaelic group and from communal and cultural agency among the Gaels.

The culture that we want *Gaeilge* to reintroduce us to will not survive the neo-liberalising of the language. A *Gaeilge* that is but a shadow of itself will circumvent the culture that we want it to bring us back to. It will be a language of neoliberalism, and an ultimate betrayal of the gems held within its grasp. *Gaeilge* will essentially be a secondary language filled in with pre-existing concepts from a consumer-driven society as opposed to being a language that would withdraw us from an economy that can no longer sustain itself. The chance of a rejuvenated and reinvented Ireland, showing other post-colonial and colonial societies what is possible would be lost.

A nation is typically described as a group of people formed on the basis of a common language which is specific to them and which ties them to a landmass through a shared history.

At the moment, under this definition the Irish nation numbers about 96,000 people. These are native Irish speakers who actively speak and live through *Gaeilge*. They are the saviours of the nation and must be afforded not just every protection, but the wherewithal to rejuvenate the rest of us.

If *Gaeilge* is to rid us of our dislocation from our own national treasures, then we ought to build on what we currently have. What we have are small areas where *Gaeilge* is spoken: the Gaeltachts. This position of strength, which was already weak, is getting weaker due to government policies. However, despite the bad press *Gaeilge* often gets, there are nonetheless very positive attitudes among the people towards the language:

All research assessments of the language attitudes of Irish people confirm that the Irish language enjoys immense goodwill as the enduring indicator of the unique, distinctive history and identity of Ireland and its people. (Ó Flatharta, et al. 2019)

The National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), recently reported in an extensive study that 6 in 10 people residing in Galway want to speak more Irish on a daily basis. There is a desire both locally and nationally

to speak *Gaeilge*. A people-led campaign that ignores government policy is essential. These campaigns must come from the Gaeltachts. They will need extensive organising and will require funding from sources other than government bodies. To achieve this we must use the economic models that led us to our malaise in the first place.

The new Ireland must use what it has at its disposal before it can walk away from it (For a similar argument see Chomsky and Pollin, *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal*, 2020). Funding proposals ought to be centred on grabbing the attention of the corporate world. And it may very well be that we form global links to other indigenous language groups to highlight the international plights of endangered languages and the enormous benefits of restoring them. This, we believe, should be centred on the ideas of ecology and language as Michael Cronin has suggested.

So, in essence, the question is: How do we monetise the language? We argue by making it a vital component to our very survival. By making this move language becomes synonymous with ecology. Environmental sustainability is the vogue among corporations. They desperately want us to know that they are interested in at least appearing to monetise this movement towards a sustainable world.

There is no lie here from the language's perspective, *Gaeilge* is the return to nature that corporations so desperately want to portray. In funding the Irish language they would be making a commitment to the ecological security of a small but well-known island. It would be minimum spend for maximum buck. At the same time it has the added advantage of shaming government bodies, which will aid any lobbying activities that we decide to involve ourselves in. How we spend the money is an open question that needs to be debated among those who are most centrally involved.

But some ideas might be to expand the Gaeltachts, develop 'guerrilla Gaeltachts', have *Gaeilge* quarters in towns and cities that reflect the values of the language, develop a "meet *Gaeilgoir*" phone app because *Gaeilge* must be spoken to survive, and monetise the language so that it becomes self-sustaining rather than requiring swathes of funding from external sources.

However, nothing is taboo and all ideas, no matter how mad-cap they might seem, should be explored. 

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