

Understanding Identity Among Minority Language-Learners: the Case of Irish in New York

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Methodology

Participant Observation:

8 weeks in a beginner's Irish language class

Hosted by Irish Arts Center via Zoom

Ethnographic Interviews:

Interviews with 16 participants, including:

- Irish language beginners - classmates
- Fluent Irish language speakers and instructors
- New Jersey-based parents raising children with Irish
- Irish, Irish-American (majority), and non-Irish participants

Findings

1. The switch to online work and learning necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for people who would not have otherwise learned Irish to begin doing so
2. For many, heritage, tradition, and reclaiming the language were driving motivators
 - a. Those with Irish ancestry often invoked oppression of their ancestors by colonialism as rationale for learning the language
 - b. Many participants were self-described polyglots and “language lovers”
 - c. Many participants participated in other Irish or Irish-American cultural activities, such as dancing, singing, or Catholic traditions (being an altar server as a child, for example)
3. The US-based Irish language community is vibrant, sophisticated, and historically grounded, with many participants, especially beginners, sharing a romanticized and idealized picture of Ireland, Irish culture, and the community-building potential of the Irish language
4. The Irish language beginner’s space is particularly accessible to women

Modern Irish in America

Definitions of the Irish language as “endangered” or “dying” typically center the shrinking Gaeltacht region in Ireland as evidence.

Additionally, scholars have argued that idealizing the Gaeltacht region ignores important political and economic realities and thus harms the Irish language revival movement (O’Rourke & Walsh 2015).

However, in the context of new Irish language learners in the NYC area, some level of idealism actually drove people to engage with the language.

Moreover, Irish language media content produced in Ireland provides useful tools for Irish language learners in the US; many classmates, for example, had already begun consuming Irish language media before the class began.

Normalizing a Minoritized Language

Minoritized languages exist everywhere due to a number of factors. In the case of Irish, speaking declined as a result of:

- British settler colonialism and plantations
- Legacy of mass emigration from Ireland due to poverty and famine
- Diminishing economic opportunities in the rural Gaeltacht region
- Decades of lackluster compulsory Irish language education in schools

Despite these factors, the NYC-area Irish language community consumes modern Irish language content, largely through the internet; a select few raise their children with Irish language or express interest in doing so.

The language emerges as a focal point for community based off shared cultural heritage or even simply interest in Irish culture; people with no Irish ancestry are welcomed and encouraged to learn the language. Thus, the language mediates social and cultural exchange.