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“Caint na ndaoine” The Irish Language as a Precedent for Standardisation

Introduction

This paper aims to explore the possibility and potential necessity of a standardised orthography for Low German (or Plattdeutsch) through an exploration of the effects of standardisation on Modern Irish. With particular reference to Mícheál Ó Siadhail’s article *Standard Irish Orthography: an Assessment* (1981) and Tadhg Ó hÍfearnáin’s *Irish Speaking Society and the State* (2009), this paper will explore the implementation of a standard Irish orthography with particular focus on the extent to which standardisation allows for the continuation of the dialects that represent native speech. Through examination of Ó Siadhail’s criticisms of the standard orthography and Ó hÍfearnáin’s social evaluation of the reforms, this paper hopes to highlight the potential problems of standardisation and as such present the notion that the standardisation of Irish be considered a precedent for the preservation of minority languages. With regards to Low German, this essay aims to explore the criticisms of the present Irish orthography that have a bearing on possible movements towards a standardisation of Low German.

The study was conducted at author's own expense.

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The Situation of Irish

Figures from the 2006 census as shown in Ó hlfearnáin (2009) reveal that just under half of the total Irish population identify as Irish speaking. This can largely be attributed to a drive in Ireland over the course of the twentieth century for the reestablishment of the Irish language through both pedagogical and legal processes. An important feature of this reinvigoration however, is that the modern Irish language is synthetic; that is, it is only reflective of native spoken Irish as opposed to a product of a particular dialect of the language gaining prestige within the speech community and becoming the standard, such as in the case of English, French or High German. Native spoken Irish can be broadly categorised into three broad varieties, generally labelled as Ulster, Connacht and Munster. That no variety of Irish had a position of dominance is largely a result of the geographical isolation of the Gaeltacht communities and the disintegration of a dialect continuum which according to Mícheál Ó Siadhail (1981) had ceased to exist even before the early beginnings of the restoration movement.

The extent of variation between the varieties of Irish and the lack of any dominant dialect has led to what Ó Siadhail (1981) describes as an "arbitrary spelling system" (Ó Siadhail, 1981, p. 73) which, due particularly to over-simplification and a general lack of phonetic abstraction, has alienated the native speaking populations of the Gaeltacht. The spelling reforms begun in 1947 (*Rialtas na hÉireann*) and finalised in 1958 (*Rannóg an Aistriúcháin*, 1958, as in Ó hlfearnáin, 2009, p. 541) aimed to create a standard Irish that by not favouring any one dialect, would protect the diversity of native spoken Irish.

Tugann an caighdeán seo aitheantas ar leith d'fhoirmeacha agus do rialacha áirithe ach ní chuireann sé ceartfhoirmeacha eile ó bhail ná toirmeasc ar a n-úsáid. [This standard gives recognition to particular forms and rules but it does not remove the validity of other correct forms, nor does it forbid their usage.]

(*Rannóg an Aistriúcháin*, 1958, p. viii)¹

While recent statistics indicate that the number of people who identify as speaking Irish has increased (Ó hlfearnáin, 2009, p. 541), the number of those speakers for whom Irish is a native language has apparently shown little sign of improvement. In *Irish-Speaking Society and the State*, Tadhg Ó hlfearnáin (2009) suggests that as a result of the standardisation of Irish and the perceived prestige of the standard orthography, the spoken dialects

¹ Translation and original text as in Ó hlfearnáin (2009, p. 568).

of Irish have "continued to lose their vitality..." (Ó hÍfearnáin, 2009, p. 568). For any minority language the alienation of its native speakers – who, for all essential purposes *are* the language – is detrimental to any attempts at attempts of language preservation.

Criticisms of the Irish Orthography

In his article *Standard Irish Orthography: an Assessment* (1981) Ó Siadhail criticised what he feels to be those aspects of the standard Irish orthography that have been detrimental to the vitality of spoken Irish. In particular Ó Siadhail argues that the lack of abstraction in the standard Irish orthography as a result of "... [its] arbitrary and random nature..." (Ó Siadhail, 1981, p. 74) has resulted in a standard language to which the native speakers of the various Irish dialects have no sense of "linguistic loyalty" (Ó Siadhail, 1981, p. 74), that is to say, the native speakers are linguistically alienated from the standard. The resultant linguistic divide between native spoken Irish and the standardised orthography is one that should be considered as a precedent in future efforts of standardisation. Criticisms of the orthography such as Ó Siadhail's consequently serve both to highlight those outcomes of standardisation that are detrimental to language conservation and provide an insight into the methods that can be utilised to avoid such outcomes in future standardisations.

Abstraction, argues Ó Siadhail (1981), should be the principal concern of any attempt to standardise a language's orthography. For languages that represent a collection of spoken dialects, abstraction is essential to ensure that speakers, regardless of the dialect they speak, can identify with the standard written language. The purpose of any standard orthography should therefore promote linguistic unity by allowing speakers to identify themselves as a part of a greater linguistic mass, as opposed to individual dialect communities. As Ó Siadhail (1981) argues, abstraction is (theoretically) essential in allowing native speakers to recognise "...the regularity of their own pronunciation" (Ó Siadhail, 1981, p. 72).

In the case of the Irish language, the degree of abstraction of the standardisations of the middle of the twentieth century is considerably varied. While there are some cases in which the spelling reforms demonstrate a degree of abstraction, such as *poll* meaning "hole", which is spelt with a short /o/ though with variation in pronunciation between the dialects; in Donegal and Mayo as an /o/ while in Connemara and Munster it is pronounced as /au/ (Ó Siadhail, 1981, p. 72). In this way the spelling is able to cater for the broader speech

community, the language is unified in the written language while able to retain variation in spoken language. This is possible as a regular phonemic rule has been incorporated at an abstract level that provides that in some dialects certain consonant clusters can cause vowel lengthening (Ó Siadhail, 1981, p. 72). In this way, the differences of spoken language can be accommodated by an abstracted orthography; speakers are aware of the variation of their own spoken dialects but can identify with the written form.

Unfortunately, this provision is not always the case in the standardised orthography. One of the four basic principles of the spelling reforms is to "Seek regularity and simplicity" (*Rannóg an Aistriúcháin*, 1958, p. viii; translation as in Ó hIfearnáin, 2009, p. 568) within the standard orthography. Simplicity is obviously the ideal of any spelling reform, however it is a delicate balance between simplification and over-simplification. Over-simplification has the potential to alienate speakers from both the standard form and from the literary history of the language. Take for example the English words *night* and *through* simplified to *nite* and *thru*. If such simplification was universal for English, within a generation young native speakers would be unable to read the majority of hitherto published literature. The historical spelling of a language, while it may not reflect the phonemic qualities of the modern spoken varieties, is nevertheless important for grounding the language within a cultural and literary history.

In the case of Irish, over-simplification has served in some cases to create a divide between native speakers and the standard orthography. As the standard orthography is considered the prestige Irish – due to its use as the standard for pedagogical, legal and international purposes – native speakers are faced with the reality that the standard language does not reflect dialectal variation. Take Ó Siadhail's example of the standard spelling of "pay" as *pá*. In traditional spelling this word was spelt and pronounced *páighe* (Donegal and Mayo) but pronounced as *páí* (Connemara) and *pá* (Munster) (Ó Siadhail, 1981, p. 73). The difference between the Donegal/Mayo spelling and the now standard Munster form are obvious. The choice of *pá* is likely one made for the purposes of simplicity; however, for the purposes of abstraction, the choice of *pá* ignores the phonemic processes of the language and distances those speakers of Donegal, Mayo and Connemara dialects from the standard form. Ó Siadhail argues that *páighe* would have been the ideal choice, as on a level of phonemic abstraction, it is possible to create a system of rules that could be applied by native speakers of Connemara and Munster to understand the difference of spelling and pronunciation.

In certain predictable contexts *-ighe* is pronounced *í*. This rule is sufficient to explain the Connemara pronunciation *páí*... Secondly, there is specifically a Munster rule which states the after a long stressed vowel an immediately following long vowel is not pronounced. As a result the Munster pronunciation is *pá*.

(Standard Irish Orthography: an Assessment, Ó Siadhail, 1981, p. 73)

Ó Siadhail's criticisms of the standard Irish orthography reveal that abstraction is essential to the success of spelling reforms. Further, that simplification, while a desirable outcome of spelling reform, can be detrimental to language conservation if it does not take into account the complete phonemic inventory of the spoken language. The association of Irish with the national language ideology have resulted in the standard orthography becoming a prestige form of the modern language. A lack of abstraction of this orthography has resulted in the alienation of speakers for whom the written language does not reflect their dialects. These criticisms consequently form an important precedent for language maintenance.

Irish Criticisms, Low German contexts

The similarity of the socio-linguistic situation of both modern Irish and the pre-standardised language with Low German lends itself to "interlingual comparison" (Hohenhaus, 2002). Low German shares a quality with Irish in that the extent of dialectal variation has made the standardisation of the language a difficult matter. The possibility of a standard Low German has been a subject of contention for the greater part of two centuries and one that has no immediate signs of instigation. Centuries of neglect have fragmented any greater language community and isolated spoken Low German into autonomous speech communities. However, this is not to argue that standardisation is "impossible" as suggested by some critics such as Bayerschmidt (1940). That the speakers of Low German identify as a holistic linguistic community is evident of the unifying nature of the language.²

Consequently Irish is an important precedent for minority languages in which there is no dominant standard. Like "Irish", the term "Low German" is a broad representation

² At the time of Low German's recognition under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1998 speakers did not identify themselves by dialect but generally as Low German speakers. For the purpose of this paper I feel that this is representative of linguistic unity. In depth socio-linguistic study may well show otherwise.

of a collection of spoken dialects that share common ancestry and mutual intelligibility. Low German, once the *lingua franca* of the Hanseatic League, now represents a collection of community dialects with an estimated three to eight million native speakers.³ Geographically these dialects extend from the border of Germany and Denmark in the north, Eastern Holland in the west, North Western Poland in the east and North of Kassel (central Germany) in the South. The extent of the Low German speaking territory (*der plattdeutsche Sprachraum*) provides the additional difficulty in that the western, northern and eastern varieties of the language have separate spelling systems, based on Dutch, Danish and Polish/Kashubian respectively. Take for example the Northern forms *de Fööt* ("the foot"), *de Daag* ("the day") compared with the Southern varieties *de Föte*, *de Dage* (Bayerschmidt, 1940). As such, any attempt at standardisation must not only consider the variation between the spoken varieties of Low German but also that which exists between the written.

Since the recognition of Low German by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1998 there has been renewed energy in the revitalisation of the language. However, the lack of any standard variety of Low German has meant that these movements have been isolated to specific dialects. The lack of a standard Low German also impedes any universal movement for the reinvigoration of a language rather than individual varieties; purely dialectal based activity can only perpetuate the isolation of the Low German communities. Bayerschmidt's argument that a standard orthography is "impossible" (Bayerschmidt, 1940, p. 502) is perhaps best described as nihilistic. The various dialects of Low German are considerably different; however the arguments presented by critics of the Irish standard orthography, particularly those of Ó Siadhail, may present a means for a considered reevaluation of the possibility of a standard Low German.

The case for a standard Low German writing system should be considered with respects to the reforms of the Irish orthography. Irish provides the linguist with an insight into the effect of standardisation on the native spoken language, insight that can be used, perhaps, to resolve the extent of variation between the dialects of Low German that has for so long prohibited standardisation. Further fragmentation of the language can only result in what Bayerschmidt (1940) predicts "...the downfall of Low German" (Bayerschmidt, 1940, p. 494).

³ This number is a recent (2006) estimate based on population numbers at the time of Low German's recognition under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1998.

Conclusion

Criticisms of the standard Irish orthography provide suggest that abstraction is essential to the success of a standardised orthography; spelling reform should focus on the underlying phonemic representations of a language rather than focusing on simplified phonetic outputs. For Low German a phonetic alphabet is not impossible, however the difficulty in producing a phonetic orthography with any degree of abstraction seems unlikely. A phonemic, rule-based orthography would appear to be the most likely mean for an abstract Low German orthography that truly represents the culture and history of *caint na ndaoine*, "the language of the people".

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"Caint na ndaoine"

The Irish Language as a Precedent for Standardisation

Abstract

Critics of the standardisation of the Irish language argue that the "modernisation" of the Irish orthography has been detrimental to the preservation of the various dialects that form native spoken Irish. The effects of standardisation on Irish consequently form an important precedent for language standardisation. The potential alienation of a language's native speakers is an outcome of standardisation that is obviously destructive for a language community that exists in a minority. The issues that surround the movement for a standardised Plattdeutsch

are similar to those faced in the standardisation of Modern Irish. Since the recognition by the European Union of Low German (Plattdeutsch) as a regional language in 1998, there has been newfound momentum in the movement for its reestablishment as a unified language of Northern Germany. One of the great difficulties of this movement however is the lack of any universal orthography due to the separate nature of the language's dialects. Given the sociolinguistic similarities of these two (albeit unrelated languages), a study of the effects of the standardisation of Irish is useful for an assessment of the possibility of a standardised Plattdeutsch.

Keywords:

Irish, Low German, standardisation, orthography, dialectology

“Caint na ndaoine”

Język irlandzki jako precedens standaryzacji

Abstrakt

Krytycy procesu standaryzacji języka irlandzkiego uważają, że „modernizacja” irlandzkiej ortografii zaszkodziła ochronie wielu dialektów składających się na oralny język natywnych Irlandczyków. Skutki standaryzacji irlandzkiego stanowią więc ważny precedens standaryzacji języków. Możliwe wyobcowanie natywnych użytkowników języka jest w oczywisty sposób destrukcyjnym dla trwania wspólnoty mniejszościowej rezultatem procesu standaryzacji. Zagadnienia towarzyszące ruchowi na rzecz standaryzacji języka dolnoniemieckiego są podobne do problemów standaryzacji, wobec których stanął współczesny irlandzki. Uznanie przez Unię Europejską dolnoniemieckiego (Plattdeutsch) jako języka regionalnego w 1998 dało nową siłę ruchowi na rzecz ustanowienia go ujednoczonym językiem północnych Niemiec. Jedną z wielkich trudności tego procesu jest brak uniwersalnej ortografii, co wynika z różnorodności dialektów tego języka. Zważywszy na sociolingwistyczne podobieństwo tych dwóch (niespokrewnionych ze sobą) języków, studium efektów standaryzacji języka irlandzkiego jest użyteczne dla oceny możliwości standaryzacji dolnoniemieckiego.

Słowa kluczowe:

irlandzki, dolnoniemiecki, standaryzacja, ortografia, dialektologia