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The Irish language in Belfast

The role of a language in post-conflict resolution

Marcas Mac Coinnigh, Linda Ervine and Pól Deeds

30.1 Introduction

The conflict in the North of Ireland – or Northern Ireland – during the period 1968–98, euphemistically known as “the Troubles”, witnessed the acute ideological and physical confrontation of three principal sets of actors: Irish Nationalists/Republicans, Unionists/Loyalists and the forces of the British State. The immediate cause of the conflict relates to the partition of Ireland in 1921 into Northern Ireland, which became a constituent part of the United Kingdom, and the Irish Free State (renamed Ireland in 1937 and described since 1949 as the Republic of Ireland), which gained independence from Britain. Religious and political affiliations were largely fixed within this northern Irish state: an inbuilt Protestant majority (i.e. Unionists/Loyalists) wished to uphold a relationship with the United Kingdom, and a Catholic minority (i.e. Nationalists/Republicans) sought the reversal of partition and the reunification of Ireland. The northern Irish state was essentially a one-party state for the period 1920–68, a “Protestant Government for a Protestant People” (Bardon, 2005, pp.538–9) in which Catholic Nationalists/Republicans suffered political, sociocultural and religious discrimination. During this period, the Irish language, as one of the main symbolic embodiments of Irish Nationalist/Republican culture, became politically contentious as a threat to the state’s “Britishness” and was actively divested and sidelined by the Unionist government as a result.

The core political reasons for the conflict (1968–98) and the concomitantly high levels of physical violence (over 3,500 deaths), sectarianism and socioeconomic destabilisation have received much scholarly attention in disciplines such as Anthropology, History, Law, Political Science and Sociology. Unfortunately, however, the underlying cultural polarisation of the Nationalist/Republican and Unionist/Loyalist communities during this period – particularly over the evocative issue of the Irish language – has not been subject to the same level of analysis. In this chapter we investigate how the interrelationships between language, religion and political conflict were embedded during the Troubles in the city of Belfast and how these polarisations are being slowly dislocated in the post-conflict era. In particular we discuss how intercultural co-operation in language promotion has developed as a method of conflict transformation and how Unionist/Loyalist and Nationalist/Republican communities
have initiated a process of positive re-engagement with the Irish language as an element of shared cultural heritage.

### 30.2 Participants and general methodology

Turas (lit. “Journey”) and An Droichead (lit. “The Bridge”) are two flagship Irish language organisations in Belfast, headed by leading language activists Linda Ervine and Dr Pól Deeds, respectively. These organisations are located in areas of Belfast whose demographic epitomises the political, religious and cultural polarities created by the Troubles. Turas at East Belfast Mission (a Methodist Church) is located in the predominantly Loyalist/Unionist Newtownards Road area of East Belfast, while An Droichead is located in the mainly Nationalist/Republican Ormeau Road area of South Belfast.

Linda Ervine is a full-time paid Irish Language Officer at Turas, a post that is funded by Foras na Gaeilge, the body responsible for the promotion of the Irish language throughout the island of Ireland, which was established in December 1999. As part of her role, she oversees 13 classes covering the Irish language, dance, music and the Welsh language, which bring together people from all parts of Belfast. In 2013, Linda received the Roll of Honour in the Aisling Award for her work promoting the Irish language, and in 2015, she received the Community Relations Council (CRC) Civic Leadership Award for her commitment to the work of Turas.

Pól Deeds is the CEO of the leading Belfast Irish language organisation An Droichead, a charitable organisation that receives funding from government departments through community funding schemes. Its operations cover south and east Belfast, where it provides services in childcare, nursery education, youth work, adult education, intercultural initiatives, arts and tourism. The organisation has won the prestigious Glór na nGael Trophy twice, achieving recognition as the all-Ireland leader in Irish language community development. Since 2010, the organisation has trebled both its turnover and staff numbers, and it is now the Irish language sector’s largest community employer in the North of Ireland.

Since 2012, Linda and Pól have led their organisations in a pioneering programme of cross-community events and activities aimed at promoting the Irish language, deconstructing cultural and linguistic myths and promoting reconciliation between communities in Belfast. To gain an insight into the public perception of the Irish language in these two opposing communities (both a source of conflict and a means of conflict resolution), Linda and Pól were asked to contribute a case-study of their respective organisations’ work in language promotion. This would include a personal testimony (circa 3,000 words) describing the rationale, history and development of their own language projects, the impact of political and religious ideologies on progress, and the role of intercultural co-operation in conflict resolution.

### 30.3 A brief historical and linguistic context

As a means of contextualising the two case-studies, it is first necessary to provide a brief sketch of the historical context to identify the major ethnolinguistic issues that pre-date the Troubles. Society in the North of Ireland is essentially bicultural and is fundamentally divided along nearly co-extensive lines of religion, ethnic and political self-ascriptions (Zenker, 2009, p.698). As a broad generalisation, it can be stated that the vast majority of Catholics identify as nationalist/republican and hold the political aspiration of a United Ireland, whilst Protestants, in the main, identify as Unionist/Loyalist and wish to maintain
the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Closely aligned with these political aspirations are the communities’ general positioning in relation to the salient symbolic aspects of British and Irish culture. The Irish language is one of the most significant of these symbols and has been traditionally embraced by Nationalists/Republicans as a core aspect of their Irish identity since the late 1900s.

The fortunes of the Irish language since the Early Modern period (circa 1600–) are inherently linked with Ireland’s political relations with England for, historically, during the period of colonial domination, English replaced the Irish language in all but a few areas of Ireland (these remaining Irish-speaking areas, termed Gaeltachtai, are located primarily on the western seaboard in Counties Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Cork and Kerry, and also in Co. Waterford in the south-east). While traditionally, since the Plantation of Ulster in 1609, both Protestants and Catholics spoke Irish, the rise of nationalist sentiment in the late 19th century, beginning with what became known as the “Irish-Ireland Movement” – an Irish cultural renaissance of sorts with its roots in European Romantic Nationalism – and culminating with the military rising of Easter 1916 against British rule, saw the language being identified more and more as a central feature of Irish identity, and, subsequently, as a key tenet of Irish Nationalist/Republican politics (see Boyce, 1991, Hutchinson, 1987, Pritchard, 2004, p.62). Within this period, Unionism itself developed from an Irish Unionism to a distinct ideology that firmly rejected all forms of Irish identity and, as Mac Póilín (2006, p.123) has pointed out, there is no more unequivocal manifestation of an Irish cultural identity than the language. Following the partition of Ireland in the period 1920–2 and the establishment of “Northern Ireland”, described by its first Prime Minister, James Craig, as a “Protestant Government for a Protestant People” (Bardon, 2005, pp.538–9), the Irish language was subjected to a sustained period of active divestment and exclusion through “a policy of systematic neglect and legislative discrimination” (Mac Ionnrachtaigh, 2013, p.80). Perceiving the Irish language as a symbolic embodiment of Irish Nationalism and a threat to the cultural dominance of “Britishness”, successive Unionist governments in the period (circa 1921–72) enacted a series of legislative measures aimed at curbing the promotion and visibility of Irish in the public and educational domains: a case in point was the fact that Irish was banned from being broadcast on BBC Northern Ireland for 50 years (O’Reilly, 1999, p.20).

The “Troubles” (1968–98) and the attendant political, religious and social polarisation of two distinct communities (the Protestant, Unionist/Loyalist majority and the Catholic, Nationalist/Republican minority) meant that cultural questions, particularly those relating to language, became highly sensitised and contested. As Crowley (2005, p.183) points out:

In the North the outbreak of war [in the late 1960s] meant a polarization of society in which semantic paranoia and antagonism at the cultural level was the corollary of sectarian violence. Signs and symbols invested with cultural and political significance for one section of the divided community were met with distrust, resistance, and often hatred by the other. The Irish language was one such symbol.

During this period, in response to Unionist policies, the language became the subject of a community-led revival throughout the north driven by passionate Irish-language activists, primarily from the nationalist-republican tradition, operating on a voluntary basis in urban centres such as Belfast and Derry. One of the most significant of these was the establishment of an Irish-speaking area in Belfast called Gaeltacht Bhóthar Seoighe (Shaw’s Road Gaeltacht) in 1969, and shortly followed in 1971 by the first Irish-medium school Scoil Ghaeilge Bhéal Feirste (Belfast Irish Language School). Operating without government
support or funding (until 1984), this project highlighted what could be achieved through community-driven activity supported by local populations. As a template for action, the model and infrastructure were soon successfully replicated throughout the north, as evidenced by the establishment of a significant system of Irish-language education catering for pre-primary, primary and secondary levels (see Mac Poilín, 2006, p.115).

Beginning in the late 1970s, and intensifying in the aftermath of the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike in which ten Republican prisoners died in protest at the removal of Special Category Status (SCS) by the British Government in HM Maze Prison (aka Long Kesh), the Irish Republican movement also became visibly more active in language promotion and in the political campaign for Irish language rights. As a form of cultural assertiveness, the issue of language rights became firmly framed within a campaign of Republican resistance to the state by the political party, Sinn Féin, and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and featured prominently in what O’Reilly (1999, p.49) has termed “decolonizing discourse”. A Sinn Féin discussion paper went as far as to state that every phrase in Irish was akin to “a bullet in the freedom struggle” (Sinn Féin, 1984, p.4). Unionists and Nationalist both recognised the language as “a highly emblematic cultural expression of resistance” (Mac Poilín, 2006, p.127), yet during the 1980s, the apparent connection between advocates of political violence and the Irish language resulted in many Unionists “being suspicious of Irish” (Mac Giolla Chríost, 2012, p.411); a common view was that the Irish language was overtly attached to the identity of the perceived Nationalist-Republican “other”. Since the 1990s, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of Protestants learning Irish, particularly in Belfast where Linda Ervine and her colleagues at Turas have successfully developed the first comprehensive series of language and cultural classes to cater for those in the Protestant community. In spite of numerous obstacles, both ideological and physical, this project has become a flagship for Protestant re-engagement with the Irish language and, as a result, a vehicle for cross-community integration and conflict resolution (for a discussion of Protestants and the Irish Language in Belfast, see Mac Coy, 1997, 2006; Mac Coy and Ni Bhaoill, 2004).

The signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998 saw all political parties commit themselves to “recognis[ing] the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity” (NIPA, 1998, p.21) and a North/South Implementation body, Foras na Gaeilge, was set up to promote the Irish language throughout the island of Ireland. As a public body, Foras na Gaeilge also serves an advisory role in matters pertaining to the Irish language in both the public and private sectors in both jurisdictions. As part of the UK signing the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1992, the British government also agreed to facilitate, encourage and finance the use of the Irish language (See Mac Giolla Chriost, 2005, pp.134–71, Kirk et al., 2001, Ó Tuathaigh, 2008, p.37). In spite of such agreement, the government’s lack of progress in officially legislating for Irish caused the issue to once again be raised in the St Andrew’s Agreement 2006, where it was agreed that “The [British] Government will introduce an Irish Language Act reflecting on the experience of Wales and Ireland and work with the incoming Executive to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language” (TSAA, 2006). An Irish Language Act has never been implemented, however. While Nationalist/Republican parties (Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SDLP)) and other centrist parties supported the Irish Language Act, Unionist parties (The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)) would not agree to implement the legislation (see Dunlevy and Ó Mainnín, 2017). The failure to deliver on this Irish Language Act was one of the chief reasons for the breakdown of trust between the two main governing parties in the executive
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(Sinn Féin and the DUP) in January 2017 and the subsequent fall of the Assembly. At the time of writing, June 2018, an Irish Language Act has not yet been legislated for and the lack of agreement over this issue has become the main obstacle to the restoration of devolutionary powers.

30.4 Turas – Linda Ervine

In this section, Linda Ervine provides a personal account of her own background growing up in working-class East Belfast and considers the common attitudes and assumptions about the Irish language in her local community. She reflects on why she decided to learn the language before discussing the inception and development of the Turas project, and the mixed reception it received from various sections of her community. In the final section, she evaluates the project’s main achievements, including its important role in community reconciliation, and considers the desiderata for creating a stable Irish-speaking community in East Belfast.

30.4.1 A personal journey

When I started learning Irish, I thought I was the first Protestant to ever learn the language. As a working-class Protestant growing up in a Unionist area during the “Troubles”, I regarded the Irish language as a “Catholic language” that belonged to nationalists, and that was probably even “a dead language”. I had no previous knowledge of the language, it had played no part in my schooling and Irish had no role within my community. In the local secondary school that I attended in the late 70s, French was the second language taught and the history we learned was British or, to be more precise, English. The Irish language had no relevance to me. I had little awareness of it and had given little thought to it, ach thit mé i ngrá leis an teanga nuair a tháinig mé uirthi (“but I fell in love with the language when I came across it”).

My first opportunity to engage with Irish came in 2011. As part of East Belfast Mission’s cross-community women’s group (set up to facilitate reconciliation), I took part in a six-week Irish language taster session. The teacher, who I was surprised to discover was a Protestant and a fluent Irish speaker, encouraged me to attend a one-day intensive course in An Droichead, an Irish language centre based on the mostly nationalist Lower Ormeau Road. It was then that I decided that I would make this language my own.

Due to my connections to Loyalism (I am married to Brian Ervine, former leader of the Progressive Unionist Party), my interest in Irish sparked a short article in the main Unionist newspaper in Northern Ireland, the Belfast Telegraph, which highlighted my seemingly unusual passion for the language.4 In that interview I mentioned East Belfast Mission and, following that, the organisation received a number of calls from people enquiring about learning Irish. In response to this unexpected interest, East Belfast Mission offered a 15-week Irish language class for local residents in October 2011. That class was attended by an average of 15 to 20 people each week and, due to its unprecedented popularity, was extended to June 2012. Throughout the year, I also began studying the historic links between the Protestant community and the Irish language and was surprised to find that Irish had been spoken by people in East Belfast in the early 20th century. For example, the 1911 Census shows that at least 699 people within the Pottinger area of East Belfast were Irish speakers.5 This new realisation that Irish was part of my own heritage reinforced my interest and enthusiasm for the language, and I resolved to do something to introduce my community to the cultural richness I had found.
30.4.2 First steps – The birth of Turas

In September 2012, with support from Foras na Gaeilge, East Belfast Mission created the post of Irish Language Development Officer for East Belfast. I took up this post and this marked the birth of the Turas project. A single Irish language taster session had grown into a project that had potential for substantial growth and community impact. The initial aims of the project were to encourage Protestants and Unionists to take an interest in the Irish language, to facilitate the learning of the Irish language and culture in East Belfast and to encourage greater cross-community contact between Protestants and Catholics.

First reactions to the project were a mixture of curiosity from some and horror from others who were not ready or willing to accept aspects of Irish culture in what they considered to be their Unionist and British community. A small number of people walked out of the new Skainos building, the home of both East Belfast Mission and Turas (which ironically had been built as a “shared space” to promote reconciliation) when they discovered that Irish language classes were being offered. Staff of the Mission also received calls from patrons informing them that they no longer wished to support the work of East Belfast Mission due to the new Irish language classes. These members of Belfast’s middle-class were of the opinion that the Irish language was a symbol of republicanism and had no place within a Methodist Church.

Despite this early criticism, the classes were well-supported, with over 40 people attending the two beginners’ classes. Many of these new learners stated that they would not have been comfortable attending classes in other parts of the city, but the fact that the classes were being offered within a Unionist area helped to persuade them to sign up. When classes were initially set up, over 90 percent of the learners were total beginners from the Unionist community, with no previous experience of the Irish language. However, their lack of knowledge of the language was not the main obstacle they faced. Some had concerns that they were doing something “wrong”, that they were somehow “betraying their own community” by learning Irish. Others were worried about how their family, friends or neighbours would view their interest in the Irish language and went to great lengths to ensure that people did not know of their attendance at the classes. This was particularly difficult because of the growing media interest in the project. Many of the learners were reluctant or simply refused, to take part in interviews or be present during the filming of classes.

From the outset, I felt it was important that, as well as introducing new learners to the language, the learners themselves should also be introduced to the wider Irish-language community. By providing free lessons in East Belfast Mission, learners were given the opportunity to engage with the language within their own community before being encouraged to venture further afield to attend Irish language events in other parts of the city. However, at first, some learners were reluctant to visit Irish language centres in nationalist parts of Belfast. At this time, too, a number of individuals suggested that Turas should refer to the language only as Gaelic (these people identified themselves as British and rejected any notion of Irishness) and should remain separate from other language groups. However, I strongly disagreed and regarded it as a priority to make links with other Irish language organisations such as Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, Cumann Cultúrtha Mhic Reachtain, Ultach Trust, Cumann Chluain Ard, Ionad Uíbh Eachach and Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin. I believed that it was important that an organisation that was perceived as Protestant and Unionist should have a presence within the Irish language world. This decision has led to many friendships and positive working relationships being formed between Turas and many other groups and individuals within the Irish language community who have supported the growth and development of the project.
Just a few months after the classes had started, Turas faced a particularly difficult situation. In December 2012, Belfast City Council passed a motion that restricted the number of days on which the Union flag could be flown on City Hall. This caused outrage among an element of the Loyalist community and led to the so-called “Flag Protests”, a campaign of civil disobedience. Nightly roadblocks on the roads outside the Skainos building made it difficult for some learners to attend classes and buses in the area were cancelled due to rioting (See Nolan et al., 2014). The numbers attending classes began to drop. In January 2013, I decided to relocate the classes to the safer setting of the local Bloomfield Presbyterian Church for three weeks, and this helped to ensure the continuation of the project.

Throughout 2013, the number of classes began to grow and a family class for parents and children was established, as well as an Irish language singing class. Learners were given the opportunity to attend courses in the Donegal Gaeltacht (i.e. Irish-speaking district) with Oideas Gael, and also travelled to Scotland as part of a cross-community initiative to raise awareness of Scottish Gaelic. A taster session of classes was set up with Charter NI, a local community group that has been linked to the Ulster Defence Association (UDA).

In February 2014, a leading member of the Orange Order spoke out against “Protestants learning Irish” and stated that his remarks were “aimed at those seeking funding for Irish language projects”. I surmised that the comments were directed at our group, as we were, to the best of my knowledge, the only funded Irish-language group within the Unionist community. I was concerned as to how the learners would react to this very public criticism. However, rather than deterring Protestants from learning Irish, the warning had the opposite effect. Messages of support were received from across the world, and new learners turned up for classes, stating that no-one was going to tell them what they could or could not do. It also strengthened the resolve of the existing learner base who took ownership of the project by setting up their own group Cairde Turas (“Friends of Turas”) to fund-raise and do other work in support of Turas. Since then, and apart from some ongoing low-key attacks on social media, the project has been supported by many and tolerated by others. Much of that support has come from groups and individuals from within working-class Loyalism, while the greatest criticism has been from middle-class Unionism who see the language as an expression of Irishness and a threat to their Britishness.

But why is the Irish language gaining a foothold in the heart of Unionist East Belfast? There are various explanations. Many Protestants have a genuine interest in the language; they want to know the meanings of the surnames and the place names they see all around them. They are intrigued by the words and phrases of a language with which they previously have not had the opportunity to engage. For some learners, their experience of travelling and living abroad has given them space to explore their sense of Irishness at a safe distance from the politics of home, and on their return to Northern Ireland they seek out classes. The origins of Turas are a factor too. It emerged from a Methodist Church organisation and is led by someone who is not only from the Protestant Community, but also married into a family regarded as Loyalist with a capital “L”. This unique situation has in some way provided Protestants with “permission” to learn a language that, until now, they had regarded as nationalist, republican and Catholic; in short, the language of their enemy.

30.4.3 Building bridges

The Turas project has also been seen as being at the forefront of community reconciliation and has gained support from many who are passionate about bringing the two sides of our community together. We have been consistent in our message that the language belongs to
everyone, and that it can and should be used as a bridge between communities. Over the
last five years, we have been working to change the narrative and challenge the perception
of who is an Irish speaker by raising awareness of the Unionist community’s historical
links to Irish language and culture. For example, most Unionists are unaware that in 1833
the Presbyterian General Assembly termed the Irish language “our sweet and memorable
mother tongue” (Ó Snodaigh, 1977, p.16), and ten years later they made it a requirement for
all of their trainee ministers to have a knowledge of the language because so many of their
congregations could not speak English. If we look at the murals in loyalist areas, we see
written on the walls Lámh Dearg Abú (“victory to the Red Hand”) – the motto of the Red
Hand Commando.

If we look at the flags we see faugh a ballagh – an anglicisation of the Irish fág an
bealach (“clear the way!”) – which is the motto of the Royal Irish Regiment. The legacy of
the Irish language is also evident in the original place names of the area, in the surnames of
the people and in everyday speech due to its influence on Hiberno-English. We have two
primary schools in East Belfast whose names are derived from Irish language place names
and which use the original Irish meaning in their school symbols. Knocknagoney Primary
School’s badge is a hill and rabbits: Knocknagoney is the anglicised form of Irish
Cnoc na gCoiníní, which means “the hill of the rabbits”. Lisnasharragh Primary School’s badge is
four horses with the words “fort of the foals”, a literal translation of the original Irish
Lios na Searrach. Sadly, the majority of parents and pupils are unaware of this. Sometimes it feels
to me that the Irish language is something to be hidden or ignored, like an ageing relative
who has turned out to be a bit of an embarrassment – if we do not mention it, then no one
will notice.

Turas has also worked to ensure that both sides of the community become aware of the
language as part of the family of Celtic languages that were once spoken throughout the
British Isles. In particular, one of the mainstays of Turas has been to highlight the shared lin-
guistic links between Ireland and Scotland. We are raising awareness of the extent to which
Gaelic is spoken in Scotland, the fact that the largest Gaelic-speaking region is in Scotland,
where the majority of speakers are Protestant, and also the fact that the people who came here from Scotland at various times in history were not only Scots speakers, but also Gaelic speakers. Essentially, we want people to know that to be a “Gael” is not a political statement and that the Gaeldom is made up of Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man.

30.4.4 Where we have got to

In the five years since Turas was set up, we have gone from strength to strength, despite the challenges. In 2017, media reports on the debate surrounding the introduction of an Irish Language Act may have had a negative effect on some people’s attitudes to the language, but it also appears to have increased interest in Irish, especially among younger people. Classes in Turas have never been busier and more and more people are registering to learn a cúpla focal (“a couple of words”).

Since 2012, the demographic of the learner base has developed and changed. Whereas the original 40 learners were almost all Protestants from the local area, learners now come from a much broader geographic area and have a different religious profile. Out of the 177 who registered for classes in 2016, 46 percent were from East Belfast, 38 percent from outside Belfast and 26 percent were from other parts of Belfast. The religious breakdown now shows that 64 percent of our learners are Protestant, 32 percent Catholic and 3 percent other. The broader geographic and religious profile of our students is very positive, as it indicates that Irish speakers in east Belfast are now part of the wider Irish-language community in the city. In regards to socioeconomic background, 46 percent define themselves as working-class, 34 percent middle-class and 20 percent other. In the early days, most people heard about the classes through word of mouth, but now it tends to be through TV or radio interviews, newspaper articles or social media posts. Since 2012, we have also witnessed a change in attitude amongst the learners who attend classes at Turas. Learners, especially established learners, are now much less likely to display any hesitation in attending Irish language classes or events in other parts of the city. They are more confident in sharing with others the fact that they are learning Irish, and no longer fear publicity. The growing number of Protestant learners and the extensive media coverage that Turas has received has sent out a strong message to Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist communities that Protestants do speak Irish, a message that has not been voiced previously.

As well as the number of learners increasing year on year, their language proficiency has also grown and developed. Turas provided formal exams for the first time in 2015, with the introduction of formal exams through CCEA, a local examinations board. In 2017, for the first time, our students will be able to study for GCSE Irish within Turas. Learners are also encouraged to enrol for examination courses at other centres and, to date, four learners have achieved the Diploma in Irish with Ulster University, while four more who came to Turas as complete beginners are now going on to study Irish at university level. Other learners achieved high grades at GCSE level and three are now studying AS Level, while another group member achieved an A* in his A Level exam in 2016.

Turas has also shown how the Irish language can be an effective bridge between the two communities in Northern Ireland. Nationalists and Unionists learn Irish together at the centre and this shared interest has led to friendships developing across religious and political divides. What began as a journey into a language that the majority of people from within the Unionist community had never before had the opportunity to engage with, has now become a journey of healing and reconciliation, with friendships being formed across sectarian divides.
30.4.5 Next steps

Since 2013, our family class has provided an opportunity for parents and children to learn Irish together, but if we want to ensure greater cross-community engagement with the language, it is vital that children from the Unionist community have equal access to Irish-medium education. A growing number of parents in Northern Ireland are choosing Irish-medium schools for their children. However, despite the fact that most Irish-medium schools are outside the Catholic sector (CCMS), only a very small number of pupils are from the Unionist community. The two main reasons why this is the case are that the majority of Irish-medium schools are located within nationalist areas, and most parents within Unionist communities are not aware of the benefits of bilingual education.

In order to establish ourselves as an Irish-speaking community and increase the number of Protestant fluent speakers, we must follow in the footsteps of those within the Irish-language community who set up the first Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland. The establishment of Irish-medium schools within the nationalist community was hard-fought, with stories of parents mortgaging houses and people spending years as volunteer teachers and helpers. But they have provided a valuable blueprint and a path that can be followed by parents who would like to access Irish-Medium education for their children. I believe that setting up Irish-medium schools in mixed and Unionist areas will provide that access, and create greater integration within our education system by encouraging more parents from Unionist communities to enrol their children in the Irish-medium sector.

Our project has grown significantly in a few short years and has achieved great success in promoting Irish in a way that is inclusive and that compromises no-one. Journalists from all over the world have visited us and talked to both staff and learners about the wonderful work that is taking place here on the Newtownards Road. But despite this, we have yet to receive the type of support from Unionist politicians that would allow us to complete our journey.

30.5 An Droichead (The Bridge)

In this section, Dr Pól Deeds describes the history of Irish-medium education (IME) during the Troubles and the connection between the Irish language and identity. He then discusses the foundation and development of An Droichead organisation, including the rationale for the project, its major achievements to date and the important role it plays in cross-community initiatives. In the final section, he considers the major challenges and opportunities for An Droichead in the years ahead and emphasises the need to promote language in new communities as a positive aspect of shared cultural heritage.

30.5.1 Background

The first Irish-medium education (IME) school for primary school children was established in Belfast in 1971. At that time, and for most of the following three decades, choosing to place a child in Irish-medium education required parents to consider factors that, thankfully, are not part of making that decision today. British government policy at that time did not recognise IME schools, and so they were left outside of the funded education sector. Starved of either recognition or support from the government, the IME sector was built up over time by the very community it served. This community-led development of an educational sector meant that, while it provided a first-class bilingual education, teachers and pupils often had
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to make do with sub-standard resources. There is little doubt that parents felt torn between their commitment to Irish-medium education and the temptation to choose a mainstream education that may offer a standard of provision that they felt their children deserved.

During the difficult times of the 1980s and 1990s, the decision was even more daunting for parents outside of west Belfast, who over several years had set up playgroups in different community facilities and then had to send their children across town to primary school in west Belfast on a minibus. As parents within that school community have attested, there was the real possibility that their child’s school bus would be stopped and searched while the children stood in the rain on the side of a busy road or motorway; bags would be searched and school buildings raided by the British army or police; community settings used to house Irish medium playgroups could be destroyed or come under attack from sectarian vandals. Yet still, these parents insisted on an Irish language education for their children. They were driven by a determination to afford their children the bilingual education that they desired, despite the attendant risks. For me, this begged – and answered – the question that in another context and another time was thrown accusingly at parents in North Belfast who chose to walk their children to school through abusive and violent protests against their Catholic school in Arndowe: why would you put your child through that? (This is a reference to the Holy Cross Dispute of 2001–2002: protests by Loyalists who tried to prevent parents and children from accessing a Catholic girls’ primary school in a predominantly Protestant area of North Belfast. This, they argued, was a reaction to Republican intimidation of the Upper Arndowe community [Shirlow, 2003, pp.91–2].) The answer in both cases is fundamentally about rights and about the integrity of our children as individuals. Both cases concern parents demanding the right for their children to be able to express their identity and access the education they want and are entitled to.

Of course, young children have limited ability to shape their own cultural identity, much less to choose the language of their education. Both of these are in the first instance cultural choices made by parents who are themselves influenced by religious and socioeconomic factors, and also by the community in which they live. The communities from which IME grew from the 1970s onwards were of an overwhelmingly Nationalist background. It is also fair to say that the community that established the first IME project outside of west Belfast in the late 1970s – a project that would eventually grow into An Droichead – was an overwhelmingly working-class and republican one.

30.5.2 Early days of IME in Belfast

The Irish language was kept alive in Belfast through the middle of the 20th century by a relatively small collection of families and activists. These centred their activities around the educational and social hubs of Cumann Chluain Ard and the Ardscoil, both in the Catholic Falls Road area in west Belfast. A number of couples who had met and sustained relationships in this social environment took the further step of establishing an urban Gaeltacht (“Irish-speaking community”) on the Shaw’s Road, also in west Belfast (see Mac Póilín, 2007, p.31, Maguire, 1991, Nig Uidhir, 2006). As couples became families, Pobal Feirste – the new Belfast Irish language community – was faced with the decision of how their children should be educated. As a result, the first Irish-medium school in the north of Ireland, Bunscoil Phobal Feirste (“Pobal Feirste” “Primary School”), came into existence. By this point, in 1971, the Northern Irish conflict was in full swing and large numbers of working-class nationalist families were becoming politicised. The Irish language long having been seen as a core part of Irish national identity, it would not be long before those in other areas
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who were closest to the nationalist and republican cause sought to emulate what had been achieved by the community of Pobal Feirste.

This is what started to happen in the republican Short Strand area of east Belfast in the late 1970s. The Short Strand had already been home to Irish language stalwarts like Liam Ó Dochartaigh, who raised his family through Irish there in the 1950s and inspired others in the district to assist in the promotion of the language. However, it was in the changed dynamic of the late 1970s that a small collection of community leaders began motivating others to learn the language and organising night classes in the district. At this point, this was primarily a republican initiative and was injected with energy by those who had recently returned from imprisonment in the Long Kesh internment camp, where Republicans had begun to share a sense and a narrative of the centrality of the language to republican ideology. They even managed to set up the first IME setting outside of Pobal Feirste in west Belfast, which they called Naíscoil Mhic Airt (after the local townland name of Ballymacarrett/Townland of the son of Gearóid). This ambitious educational venture eventually became a victim of the British government policy of removing public funding from community entities that were seen to be associated with or sympathetic to republicanism (see Ó hÁdhmaill and Watt, 1990). The centre that housed the naíscoil lost its funding and closed in 1987. However, something had been started, namely the education of a whole group of local children, and the imperative to nurture that sustained a living link between the language and the community. The children who had attended Naíscoil Mhic Airt were ferried over to attend Bunscoil Phobal Feirste and, later, the newer Gaelscoil na bhFál on the Falls Road, which, as we have seen, was not without its challenges.

Founder members of the An Droichead project recall a feeling among the nationalist community in the early 1980s that IME could perhaps provide a focus or at least a distraction from the despair that spread in the wake of the 1981 Hunger Strikes. Republican activists, in particular, were energised by this new cultural mission and sought to unify the community around its goal of improving their children’s futures. Another effort to provide a local IME hub – this time in the Market area – lasted a couple of years before the pupils of the nascent Gaelscoil Éanna (St Enda’s Primary School) also continued their educational journey through the more established schools of west Belfast. An important development was the forging of links with like-minded parents and community leaders in the lower Ormeau area, where many families already had roots in the Market and Short Strand. In particular, the Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group (LORAG) provided crucial support for the local growth of Irish language initiatives, including social events for parents and holiday schemes for children. While their children’s education continued in west Belfast, local parents had a new focus for Irish language activity on the banks of the Lagan.

30.5.3 An Droichead

And so, in 1992, parents formed a committee to take forward a new IME project. They called it Naíonra an Droichid (“Nursery of the bridge”), symbolising the proximity to the River Lagan and the bridges that linked the different communities they were intended to serve. Determined to make their IME project sustainable this time, they immediately set about recruiting families and fundraising. They resolved to acquire a site and develop a cultural and educational centre for the community they hoped to build. A derelict plot that had been used as a car park by a large media company became available, and the group secured a £80,000 bank loan with which to purchase it. A major break came when the Special EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation provided funding to establish a
primary school, allowing the committee of An Droichead to develop school facilities and to employ teaching staff. As numbers in the school continued to grow – double figures were reached within a couple of years – the committee simultaneously sought to progress the independent development of the school and fundraise for a cultural centre that would broaden the reach of their community Irish-language programme.

The opening of An Droichead’s cultural centre, Láirionad an Droichid, in 2000 achieved these aims. If securing the EU grant for the school project had been a turning point, this was no less significant in how it would impact the promotion of Irish in south and east Belfast. School numbers were approaching the level required to ensure recognition from the Department of Education, which had to adopt slightly more favourable policies in relation to Irish after the Good Friday Agreement (1998). Recognition from the Department provided continuous revenue funding and saw An Droichead divesting themselves of management responsibility for the school. With this responsibility passed on, their new centre acted as a springboard for a much more ambitious and extensive programme of cultural activities. The centre acted initially as a hub for the school community, providing nursery and afterschool care, language classes for parents and homework support, and small-scale social events to bring the school community together. While not altogether new, An Droichead’s school and cultural centre set-up established a simple template for Irish-language community development that has proven effective in communities across Ireland (for example, the effectiveness of this model was recognised by the recently devised Scéim na nIonad (“Centres’ Scheme”) promoted by Foras na Gaeilge, the all-Ireland Irish language funding body, and also by An Ciste Infheistíochta Gaeilge (“The Irish Language Development Fund”), established in 2010 to fund the building of Irish language centres within communities). Another mark of its success was An Droichead being awarded the top prize in the 2005 national Glór na nGael competition for groups across the island.10 Having been part of the An Droichead community for only a couple of years at this point, I remember clearly how everyone felt a huge sense of pride at the fact they had reached that point. Indeed, this national success was a fitting recognition of the progress that had been made.

30.5.4 New communities

We made no secret of our national success in the Glór na nGael competition. The publicity helped us to attract more families from more areas to the project and generated significant new interest in all of our programmes. The arts programme exploded; numbers in the school and our childcare services rose steadily, leading to renewed confidence in our efforts to secure new school facilities. We set our sights on further expansion and diversification of our activities. A comprehensive consultation among stakeholders delivered an agreed new strategic direction for the organisation, one that emphasised social economy initiatives and partnership work in order to take the language into communities and sectors where it was still unfamiliar. As well as continued growth in the school and our day-to-day activities, the main highpoints of An Droichead’s progress around this time were our physical development plans, a new tourism element in the arts programme and reconciliation initiatives that forged relationships with members of the loyalist communities that lie around our Ormeau Road base. Success in extending our reach in these areas led to An Droichead winning the Glór na nGael top prize again in 2009. As before, we used this to stimulate another expansion in the organisation’s activities.

One of the main areas of expansion was in our outreach programme. We made a concerted effort to engage with new communities, including the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist
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(PUL) community. We organised cross-community Irish language and Scots Gaelic classes and introduced a strong Scottish element to our arts programme in an effort to emphasise the shared Gaelic heritage of indigenous communities here. We noticed a significant increase in interest from PUL learners, with several attendees at our classes were happy to announce that they came from a PUL background. They were pleasantly surprised when they received the same welcome as anyone else, with their declaration of their background barely raising an eyebrow. It was during this period, in 2010, that Linda Ervine began her journey towards fluency in Irish, having first come into contact with it through initiatives organised by An Droichead. So much of this work is down to effective leadership, and there is no doubt that Linda’s leadership within her community has brought about one of the most intriguing and important changes in attitudes towards the Irish language in the north of Ireland. This change in attitude has in turn opened up more opportunities for outreach work.

We have always found that one of the key ways of engaging new sectors and new communities in the Irish language is by providing an experience of Irish traditional music. Traditional music is viewed internationally as the quintessential cultural product of Irishness and is warmly appreciated wherever and whenever it manifests. In a live format, in particular, it draws most listeners or groups in to a deeper reflection upon Irish culture and paves the way for conversations about language. Our arts programme was always in part a means to an end, in that our ultimate goal was to open people up to engaging not only with the culture but also with the language itself. We present concerts bilingually in Irish and English, performers often have Irish and are encouraged to use it, and at every opportunity, we publicise to our audience or participants the availability of Irish language learning with An Droichead. The range and accessibility of Irish-language experiences is also crucially important so that people can get a taste of the language in an enjoyable way that remains with them – first impressions count. Therefore, we offer formal classes for all levels of ability, conversation circles, singing classes, trips to the Gaeltacht (Irish speaking districts in the west of Ireland), taster sessions, information mornings, weekend intensive courses and residential. We began to organise sessions with the musicians who played in An Droichead and to package these for businesses and agencies in the hospitality and tourism sector, learning as we went the best way to develop our brand and stay true to our mission at the same time. Emphasising social economy now more than ever, we decided in 2013 to commit to a regular tourism offering by working with The Dirty Onion, a traditional music-themed city centre pub. This was a significant commitment: we signed up to provide no less than five traditional music sessions per week as well as a bodhrán (Irish drum) class and a harp class. What made it most appealing for us was that we would also run a weekly Irish-language conversation circle in the pub. Once again, music and language went hand-in-hand. We eventually decided to launch our own tourism offering, with the Belfast Traditional Music Trail starting in 2017. The Irish language plays a role in the content of the tour, and most of the musicians who guide the tour are bilingual.

30.5.5 Changed times

Belfast is an awakening city. Ten years ago, the Belfast Traditional Music Trail and The Dirty Onion would not have happened. There would have been few city centre publicans, outside of the traditional bars where the clientele is mainly from a nationalist background, who would have taken a chance on an Irish traditional offering that was proudly associated with the Irish language. Now most of them recognise its appeal. That recognition in the private sector, just like the softening of attitudes in the PUL community, has a ripple
Marcas Mac Coinnigh, Linda Ervine and Pól Deeds

effect that opens up further opportunities for the promotion of the language. A language that was branded as divisive by all of the Unionist political parties since the foundation of the Northern Irish state (see, for example, Andrews, 2017) was now popular among working-class loyalists and middle-class liberal Unionists; this language, that since the middle of the 18th century was cast as a hindrance to one’s climbing of the social ladder, was now all of a sudden seen as sophisticated and as adding value to the entertainment offerings of local businesses.

None of this happened overnight. It took years of building our reputation in order to reach the point where people from a PUL background wanted to attend classes in An Droichead or where a successful hotelier felt inclined to ask us to provide a cultural programme for their new city-centre pub. The growing childcare services, the success of the school we set up and the range of opportunities for adults and young people from all backgrounds to access quality Irish-language experiences all led to those first tentative conversations, which in turn led to a hundred more. I have already mentioned the importance of leadership in promoting the language, and I think it is important to say that there is an element of bravery involved. From the earliest days of the An Droichead project – and its predecessors in the Market and Short Strand – bravery was needed in order to achieve what was achieved. There is the bravery of the people who went out in very dark days and sold the idea of the language and of IME to a nationalist community that, in the main, had only ever thought of Irish as a token symbol of their identity; there is the personal bravery of the individuals who pooled their resources and even took out loans to acquire the facilities that would support the growth of their community; and then there is the bravery of taking our language and our identity to new places like PUL communities, in to what might have previously been hostile territory, and saying “This is who we are, and we want to share it with you”.

30.5.6 The future

One of the great initiatives that we have been involved in over the last few years is a cross-community summer camp funded by the government’s Together: Building United Communities (T:BUC) programme. In our camp, we bring together young people from the PUL community with young people who attend IME schools, and over the course of a week, we provide basic Irish language lessons, as well as team-building activities and trips. Where other cross-community initiatives might try to maintain a “neutral” environment, participants in our T:BUC camp are encouraged to talk about their identity and to wear things like football tops that are associated with their community background. This is central to An Droichead’s ethos: being open and proud about who we are as Irish speakers, and this being the starting point for all conversations. Honesty, integrity and openness speak for themselves and we find that, invariably, people respond. The conversations that result – breaking down myths and misperceptions, confronting challenging cultural truths and celebrating what makes us different, rather than fearing “the other” – are the most important that there have been in the north of Ireland for a long time, in any language.

30.6 Conclusion – postscript

This chapter provides a case-study based on participant testimony of how the Irish language became a semaphore for religious and political positionings during the Troubles (1968–98) in Belfast, and subsequently embedded and polarised positionings in a zero-sum game of cultural contestation. In the current post-conflict era, however, the Irish language
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has become a focal point for cross-community co-operation as an element of shared heritage and a means of encouraging the reassessment of the cultural memory of the two main ethnopolitical blocs. While this current chapter merely highlights the major issues involved from the perspective of on-the-ground language activists at Turas and An Droichead, it is clear that there is a need for comprehensive, rigorous academic analyses of these issues within appropriate theoretical frameworks, particularly comparative studies that examine the role of language in other political conflicts. Such studies would greatly assist our understanding of the role of language both as an object of contestation and as a potential tool in the process of reconciliation and conflict resolution.

At the time of writing (June 2018), the political institutions in the Assembly have been in abeyance for almost a year due to a series of disagreements, primarily between the two major two parties – Sinn Féin (representing Republicanism/Nationalism) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) (representing Loyalism/Unionism) – over both policy decisions, e.g. the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme, and more general principles of respect, equality and parity of esteem. At the core of the latter has been the issue of an Irish Language Act (Acht na Gaeilge), which was guaranteed in the St Andrews Agreement of 2006. Currently, five parties (primarily Nationalist) in the Assembly are in support, while the three Unionist parties oppose the Act. A series of public protests in 2017 by the Irish language community, headed by An Dream Dearg (The Red Group) – an ad hoc single-issue language lobby group – has galvanised a cross-community consensus for an Irish Language Act. The sight of Turas and An Droichead at the heart of these protests, marching shoulder to shoulder, is symbolic of how the Irish language has become a focal point for improved community relations through the prism of a shared linguistic heritage. Regardless of the political impasse, the grassroots work at Turas and in An Droichead continues to prosper: invigorating working-class communities, buttressing cross-community links and challenging the homogenisation of language, religion and politics along binary lines. It is a source of hope to many in the post-conflict era that the Irish language, instead of being a source of division, is now a stimulant for not only the physical movement of communities across religious and political boundaries but also the traversing of historically embedded ideological zones.

Glossary

Bunscoil Phobal Feirste (Belfast Community Primary School) – the first Irish-medium primary school in West Belfast, opened in 1971.

Catholic a marker of ethnic identity or community membership. The term is used to indicate an Irish identity or as a synonym for Irish Nationalist.

Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) the advocate for the Catholic Maintained Schools sector in Northern Ireland.

Cumann Chluain Árd (The Association of Clonard) – Irish-only social club and branch of the Gaelic League in West Belfast.

Foras na Gaeilge the body responsible for the promotion of the Irish language throughout the whole island of Ireland, established in 1999.

Glór na nGael established in 1961, was unveiled as one of six national Lead Organisations for the Irish language.

Hunger Strike (1981) the culmination of a five-year protest by Irish Republican prisoners against the withdrawal of Special Category Status for political prisoners in HM Maze Prison (aka Long Kesh). Ten Republican prisoners died on hunger strike.
IME  Irish-Medium Education.

Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group (LORAG)  a community development organisation that supports the residents and community of the Lower Ormeau area of South Belfast.

Protestant  a marker of ethnic identity or community membership. The term is used to indicate a British, Northern Irish or Ulster identity.

Orange Order  a fraternal organisation that aims to defend and promote Protestantism (religion, culture and traditions).

PUL  an acronym for Protestant–Unionist–Loyalist.

Red Hand Commando  a small Loyalist paramilitary group linked to the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).

Republicans  those individuals who see the unification of Ireland as their primary goal. Often used as a synonym for supporters of Sinn Féin (although decreasingly so) or those in the past who may have advocated or supported a military strategy to achieve their goal.

The “Troubles”  the popular term to describe the military conflict in the north of Ireland between 1968–98 which was contested by Irish Republicans, Ulster Loyalists and forces of the British State.

Ulster Defence Association (UDA)  formed in 1971, this is the largest Loyalist paramilitary group in the north of Ireland.

Progressive Unionist Party (PUP)  a small left-wing Unionist political party formed in 1979. Primarily supported by working-class loyalists in Belfast.

Royal Irish Regiment (RIR)  the infantry regiment of the British Army whose motto is Faugh a’ Ballagh (‘Clear the way’).

Notes

1 These figures depend on when the conflict is considered to have ended. See http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/
2 See www.ebm.org.uk/turas/
3 See www.androihead.com
4 See www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/ervine-relative-speaks-up-for-irish-28654022.html
5 See www.census.nationalarchives.ie/
6 See www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-26000146
7 See www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/irish-language-sector-has-doubled-in-numbers-in-last-decade-30857946.html
8 See www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/irish-language-sector-has-doubled-in-numbers-in-last-decade-30857946.html
9 See www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/04/protestants-go-gaelic-northern-ireland-201442313264179630.html
11 See www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-38414486

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