

Review Essay

Seán Ó Riain

John M. Kirk and Dónall P. Ó Baoill, eds. 2001. *Linguistic Politics: Language Policies for Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Scotland*. Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona. xv, 258pp.

This is the third volume in the Belfast Studies in Language, Culture and Politics series, and comprises mainly the papers delivered at a symposium on Languages and Politics at Queen's University Belfast from 23-25 August 2001. The papers deal with language policy in Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland: three of them are in Irish, six in Scots, and 15 papers and the introduction are in English. The reader is exposed to Scots at an academic level — an experience which clearly shows its capabilities. There are case studies of Norwegian, Swiss German, Romansh, Low German, and Frisian, and a detailed account of the influence in Northern Ireland of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) by one of the foremost experts in this area, Dónall Ó Riagáin. I would like to thank the editors, Dr John Kirk and Prof. Dónall Ó Baoill, for the opportunity to review this book.

To draw attention to two topical points: first, Michael Russell, MSP gets his emphasis right when he speaks of the need for a bill which 'puts obligations on Scotland's public and private sector to use ... Gaelic' (p. 28). Second, Kevin McCafferty makes a point (p. 93) on usage of the two Norwegian languages which has particular resonance in Ireland: according to the Language Usage Act 1930, the 'civil service language of a lower administrative level in the State shall determine the form used at a higher level to handle correspondence between them'. In the early years of the Irish State the upper echelons of the civil service, taken over from the colonial service, while bereft of Irish, were effective in discouraging its official use among junior Irish-speaking colleagues (see Ó Riain 1994: 128-30 for details of knowledge of Irish at various levels in some Irish Government Departments in 1937-38).

A common thread running through this publication is the ongoing confrontation between 'strong' and 'weak' languages, and how best to defend the weak against the strong. Human existence for thousands of years was largely ruled by the 'might is right' ethos and, as Dónall Ó Riagáin points out (p. 43), the whole concept of

non-discrimination and human rights, of rights universally and equally belonging to all human beings, and of machinery to enforce respect for them, is a radical change, dating only from the post-World War II period. It is salutary to note that it took the industrial murder of millions by a régime which considered them inferior to bring about this change, so entrenched was the old thinking.

It is therefore little surprise that the new thinking is only now beginning to percolate to the field of language use — the ECRML was adopted in 1992, almost 40 years after the Council of Europe Human Rights Convention. Old thinking is still much in evidence, such as the reaction of monoglot English or French speakers who consider the speaking of Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Breton, etc. in their presence to be 'bad manners'. The ECRML is significant, but it marks only the first tentative step away from the old order. It is far from ideal but, politically, it was the maximum achievable at that time. It will be a useful tool, and its inclusion here is apt.

Robert Dunbar (pp. 231-36) identifies six classes of minority language policies which governments can offer, ranging from 'assimilation' to 'strong support'. Romansh in Switzerland (discussed by Andreas Fisher, pp. 113-18) can be said to benefit from 'strong support' educationally. In addition, there has been a state-supported daily newspaper since 1997, and there is provision for daily radio and regular TV use. The first three years of primary school in designated Romansh-speaking areas of the canton of Graubünden take place exclusively in Romansh. This is arguably stronger support than can at present be envisaged for Irish in Northern Ireland, Scottish Gaelic, or Scots. Nevertheless, Romansh continues to decline rapidly: in 1980 it was spoken by 0.8% of the Swiss, in 1990 by 0.6%, and in 2000 by a mere 0.4% (Swiss Census figures for 2000, published in *Swiss News*, March 2002, p. 4). If this level of support has not halted the decline of Romansh, is a lesser degree of support likely to do so for Gaelic or Scots?

This book is a useful contribution to the continuing debate on languages and politics, which has gained considerably in importance in recent years, particularly in Northern Ireland. These developments have not gone unnoticed in Continental Europe, even if sometimes misunderstood.¹ The presentation is innovative, in that the lesser-used languages are used here, although one misses a contribution in Scottish Gaelic. The intention to broaden the debate by including a European dimension is laudable. In this context the contributions by Ó Riagáin, Görlach, McCafferty, and Fischer are

relevant, and those by Ó Cofaigh, Ó hAinmhire, and Mac Cormaic supply the necessary all-Ireland dimension. The idea of considering language and politics in three jurisdictions is praiseworthy, although one wonders why Wales, where the progress of a minority language is more advanced, was not included.

However, contributions to this volume in general lack awareness that the very worthy efforts of language activists — whether for Irish, Scottish Gaelic, or Scots — are doomed to failure in the absence of a comprehensive EU language policy, designed to balance the needs of efficient and effective communication with the equally vital need to protect and promote cultural and linguistic diversity. (Schulz 1979 presents this dichotomy in his title *Europäische Hochsprache oder Sprachimperialismus?* 'A Pan-European language or linguistic imperialism'. See also Phillipson 1992, 2003; Blanke 2001; and Bormann and Frank 1994.) All languages must henceforth learn to thrive in the context of an integrating Europe. The course taken so far by European integration — concentrating on economic matters and leaving languages/culture until much later — is historically explicable, but has now produced a major weakness. In Frank's (1999: 7) view, 'for many the EU is scarcely more than a region of harmonized pig prices!' Frank sees Europe's principal problem as the lack of a European identity, partly due to the lack of a common language to express it. This is apparent, for instance, from the lack of any words other than 'Euro' on the new banknotes. At a deeper, political level, it is shown by the very low participation in the 2001 Irish referendum on the Treaty of Nice.

A continuing debate at EU level on language/culture/identity is needed, for instance through the setting up of a permanent conference on EU language policy, where politicians, linguists, educationists, etc. could freely exchange ideas, thereby heightening public awareness. Nothing should be irrationally excluded from consideration, such as the possible contribution of a planned language, such as Esperanto. The latter could have a vital role, both in promoting European identity and in improving and accelerating the learning of national and regional languages. The stark contrast between EU monetary policy and EU language policy is instructive. In the monetary area thinking has been innovative and effective. The EU has successfully adopted the Euro. Called 'Esperanto-money' by a German politician (Peter Gauweiler, CSU, Bavaria) in 1993,² its successful launch has been a major boost to European consciousness. It is,

however, only a first step: sooner or later the thorny issue of EU language policy must be tackled, and until it is, the efforts outlined in this volume will not bear the fruit they deserve.

In the language area old thinking continues to threaten the very diversity Europe wishes to preserve. The official EU policy of equality between the 11 official working languages, costing over €2 billion per year, poorly hides the inexorable advance of English, and provides a negligible role for languages such as Irish, Scots Gaelic, or Scots. The negative effects of this 'drift' grow clearer daily. As the demand for English in Continental Europe soars, foreign languages in Britain are dropping in importance: in February 2002 the British Government announced that henceforth students could drop all foreign language study at age 14.³ This decision called forth an unprecedented public protest by the Ambassadors of France, Germany, Italy and Spain. EU-financed agencies advertise jobs for 'native English-speakers', thus discriminating against 84% of the EU taxpayers who pay for them. Mainstream media such as the German *Die Zeit* have started to take notice (*Die Zeit*, 29 September 2001, p. 30). Interest has increased to the point that on 12 March 2002 Commission member Neil Kinnock had to reply to a question by Italian MEP Maurizio Turco on the steps it had taken to consider 'the possibility of learning and using "Esperanto" as a relay language for conference interpretation'. Kinnock's view was predictably negative, but this issue is, significantly, proving ever more difficult to ignore.

Improved language teaching is particularly relevant to the languages discussed in this book due to the weakness in inter-generational transmission. A topic not addressed is the failure of the English-medium education system to give the majority of Irish children a working knowledge of Irish after years of study, and the whole question of the possible contribution of short 'propaedeutic'⁴ Esperanto courses in pilot projects to test to what extent they might accelerate and improve the learning of Irish (or Scots Gaelic, or Scots, etc.). There is wide acceptance of the *propaedeutic* value of learning any second language well, i.e. that skills thus acquired tend to speed up the learning of subsequent languages. Esperanto appears to be particularly effective in this area. Its regular grammar, orthography, and pronunciation give total predictability,⁵ and its system of some 40 prefixes and suffixes vastly reduces vocabulary learning (Wells 1989, Richmond 1993), giving all language learners a taste of success, increasing confidence. An interesting additional finding

is that the less linguistically talented a student is, the more he/she tends to benefit from an introductory Esperanto course. Every experiment in this area since 1921 has shown that short Esperanto courses do tend to have propaedeutic value,⁶ and can even deepen analytical understanding of the mother tongue by showing clearly how language functions (Corsetti 2001, Piron 1986). This has been accepted by reports of the Finnish (1984) and Italian (1993) ministries of education.⁷ It is a particularly efficient stepping-stone towards the study of French or Spanish, because much of the vocabulary is similar, but the learning of the 2,500 forms needed to master the French verb reduces to a mere six verbal endings in Esperanto (Maxwell 1988).⁸

To sum up: a comprehensive EU language policy is essential to resolve the seemingly intractable problems dealt with in many contributions to this volume. Such a policy can totally modify present parameters so that Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and Scots, and indeed all European languages, can have a future. Nothing else can.

Notes

1. A short note in *Die Zeit* on 7 March 2002, p 2, maintained that 'the two sides in NI managed to fight in English — now they make peace, they wish to speak different languages'.
2. The negative connotations of the word 'Esperanto', particularly in Germany, owe much to Nazi and Stalinist propaganda against this 'language invented by a Jew' (Lins 1988: 90).
3. *Die Welt*, 13 February 2002, p 6, which reported that in 2000 only 2.8% of British students completed second-level French studies, and a mere 1.1% did so in German.
4. The basic grammar of Esperanto, which fits on one page, and about 500 of the most frequently-used words.
5. See Nuessel (2000: 41-57), Janton (1993: 41-78), Centassi and Masson (1995: 187-94), and Ó Riain (2001: 33-34); see also www.esperanto.net, which contains information on Esperanto in 57 languages, including Irish.
6. Such experiments are examined in Formizzi (1987), Chiti-Batelli (1987), Symoens (1992), Vilisics Formaggio (1995), and Corsetti and

Pinto (2001). Details of some individual experiments are in Fisher (1921), Halloran (1952), and Sonnabend (1979).

7. Ó Riain (2001: 23) and Selten (1997: 93-112), text of an Italian Ministry of Education report of December 1993 which summarizes experiments on propaedeutic Esperanto, and has a useful bibliography.

8. Its ease does not impoverish it: the most recent Esperanto-German dictionary, Krause (1999), contains over 80,000 headwords drawn from actual usage.

References

- Blanke, D. ed. 2001. *Sprachenpolitik in Europa*. Berlin: Gesellschaft für Interlinguistik e.V.
- Bormann, W. and H. Frank. 1994. *Für Europas Mehrsprachigkeit/ Por Plurlingveco de Eŭropo*. Berlin and Paderborn: Akademia Libroservo.
- Centassi, R. and H. Masson. 1995. *L'homme qui a défié Babel*. Paris: Éditions Ramsay.
- Chiti-Batelli, A. 1987. *Communication internationale de avenir des langues et des parlars en Europe*. Nice: Presses d'Europe.
- Corsetti, R. and M. A. Pinto. 2001. Ricadute Metalinguistiche dell'insegnamento dell'esperanto sulla lingua materna dell'allunno — Un'esperienza nella scuola media italiana. *Language Problems and Language Planning* 25(1): 73-90.
- Fisher, A. 1921. Modern Languages by way of Esperanto. *Modern Languages* 2: 19-182.
- Formizzi, G. 1987. *Il valore educativo della lingua internazionale*. Quaderni K, 4. Milan: FEI.
- Frank, H. 1999. *EUROPA: so, oder besser — Anstösse zu Diagnose und Therapie*. Paderborn: ALEUS/Akademia Libroservo.
- Halloran, J. H. 1952. A four-year experiment in Esperanto as an introduction to French. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 22(3): 200-204.
- Janton, P. 1993. *Esperanto — Language, Literature and Community*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Krause, E.-D. 1999. *Grosses Wörterbuch Esperanto-Deutsch*. Hamburg: Helmut Buske.
- Lins, U. 1988. *Die Gefährliche Sprache*. Gerlingen: Bleicher.
- Maxwell, D. 1988. On the Acquisition of Esperanto. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 10: 51-61.

- Maxwell, D. 1988. On the Acquisition of Esperanto. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 10: 51-61.
- Nuessel, F. 2000. *The Esperanto Language*. New York: Legas.
- Ó Riain, S. 1994. *Pleanáil Teanga in Éirinn 1919-1985*. Baile Átha Cliath: Carbad/Bord na Gaeilge.
- Ó Riain, S. 2001. *An tAontas Eorpach agus an Ghaeilge: Féiniúlacht agus Éagsúlacht Teanga / The EU and the Irish Language: Identity and Linguistic Diversity*. Corcaigh agus Baile Átha Cliath: Clódhanna Teo. Do Scríbhneoirí Gaeilge Chiarraí.
- Phillipson, R. 1992. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Phillipson, R. 2003. *English-Only Europe? Challenging Language Policy*. London: Routledge.
- Piron, C. 1986. L'espéranto vu sous l'angle psychopédagogique. *Education et Recherche* 8(1): 11-41.
- Richmond, I. M. 1993. *Aspects of Internationalism 3: Language and Culture*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Schulz, R. 1979. *Europäische Hochsprache oder Sprachimperialismus?*. Gerlingen: Bleicher.
- Selten, R. 1997. *The Costs of European Linguistic [Non] Communication*. Rome: Esperanto Radikala Asocio.
- Sonnabend, H. 1979. *Esperanto: lerneja eksperimento*. Pisa: Edistudio.
- Symoens, E. 1992. *Apprendre des langues étrangères*. Antwerpen: Flandra Esperanto-Ligo.
- Vilisics Formaggio, E. 1995. *L'Orientamento Linguistico — Metodo per facilitare l'apprendimento delle lingue*. Rome: 'Esperanto' Radikala Asocio.
- Wells, J. 1989. *Lingvistikoj Aspektoj de Esperanto*. Rotterdam: Universala Esperanto-Asocio.