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# “No, it is a hobby for me”: Examining the motivations of non-Irish learners of the Irish language in North America



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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how non-Irish learners of Irish Gaelic in Ontario, Canada navigate through questions of authenticity and legitimization as members of the Irish language network. Learners without Irish heritage often convey a happenstance or hobby-like connection, which stands in contrast to motivations common in the Irish diaspora that often connect with participants' sense of who they are as Irish people. Despite viewing their connection as hobby-like, many are fluent speakers with longstanding involvement in the network, and are legitimized by sharing ideologies that stress an ancient quality to the language, and as musicians or holders of valued linguistic and cultural knowledge. While the difference in motivations for attending may be evaluated and ranked hierarchically, it does not have a determining impact on fluency.

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## 1. Introduction

One Friday evening during the 2012 Irish immersion week that takes place in Eastern Ontario, on a piece of land set aside exclusively for Irish language immersion called *Gaeltacht Thuaisceart an Oileáin Úir*,<sup>1</sup> attendees gathered after classes and dinner to re-enact a comical version of an Irish wake, as part of a group workshop. Participants were encouraged to approach the smirking actor that was playing the part of the recently deceased, and to practice using their *cúpla focal* (couple of Irish words) to lament his passing. When I took a brief break from the proceedings and walked across the field, I could hear howls of laughter echoing through the rolling fields of the sixty acre parcel of land as the sun set, illuminating the leaves in the old apple orchard lining the hills. When the re-enactment was finished, I sat down beside an attendee in her mid-twenties from Quebec named Sheenagh,<sup>2</sup> and we listened to one of the camp's organizers as he wrapped up the workshop. He began to explain the significance of the event, in Irish, and how the ceremony has mostly fallen into obscurity in present-day Ireland. After reflecting on the importance of bringing awareness to older customs, he switched into English, stating that the language “was not a hobby” for the group, and that it meant something much more, because we were reclaiming our identities as *Gaels* (Gaelic speaking peoples).

Shortly after, Sheenagh asked if I wanted to visit the riverbank to relax and take some time away from the group. As we were walking, we discussed the re-enactment and the talk that ensued afterward. After thinking for a moment, she responded to what was said earlier, saying “no, it is a hobby for me”, and proceeded to explain that her decision to come to the immersion

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<sup>1</sup> Gaeltacht usually refers to an area in which Irish is spoken, and Thuisceart an Oileáin Úir is one of the Irish language placenames for North America. It translates to “northern, fresh (new) island”.

<sup>2</sup> All participants and interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

event was based on a quirky interest that isn't very serious. After some time at the river, we walked back to the camp, and resumed our participation in the group's activities for the evening.

This story highlights the ways in which motivations are valued and regimented in diasporic Irish language events. In this paper, I examine the presence, contributions, and socialization of learners who carry this hobby-like attachment to Irish. I discuss the motivations of these learners and how they fit into wider discourses in the Irish diaspora, in an attempt to interrogate the relationship between having this type of attachment and the type of participation that follows. In general, when asked why they are learning Irish, non-Irish attendees offered a narrative that explained not why, but how they became involved. Their narratives usually focused on an attachment that was formed in stages throughout their lives. In addition, they offered discourses about the perceived antiquity of the language, which is a highly valued language ideology at Irish immersion events.

This paper is part of a special edition of this journal that jointly examines how ethnolinguistic identities impact attempts to revive a language. In this issue, [Weinberg & De Korne \(2015, 7\)](#) describe the mutual processes of legitimation conflicts and authentication processes in Lenape language courses at a liberal arts college. Examining the motivations of non-Irish learners allows for an elucidation of the discourses that are dubbed legitimate and important, and the underlying ideological dimensions that assign value to the various reasons for learning the language. Further, it will serve to examine some of the mechanisms that are responsible for increased attention to a language that has largely not survived through intergenerational transmission in the diaspora.

In situations of advanced language shift, in which the majority of the heritage population was not raised in the language, the motivations and affective attachments of learners are especially integral to their participation and the overall success of the effort (e.g. [Warner et al., 2009, 144](#)). These are integral parts of forming a community of practice, upon which a linguistic community can be built, and can help solidify revitalization efforts. These processes serve as types of socialization that occur in communities of practice that serve to delimit the boundaries of appropriate participation in language communities for those not connected through ethnicity. Importantly, high degrees of regimentation affect who can participate, and in what ways ([Kroskrity, 2000](#)).

In addition to examining the processes of boundary maintenance and inclusion of non-heritage learners of Irish, this paper further explores the findings of [Gardner \(2007\)](#) relating to the place of motivation in learning additional languages. He states that learning outcomes are contingent on a combination of affective, cognitive, and behavioral elements of motivations. This suggests that a hobby-like motivation or attachment to language learning does not preclude a mastery of the language. With this in mind, I focus on the motivations of learners and the assigned social value of these motivations in this community of practice, in order to elucidate the way that it shapes these learners' participation in the revitalization effort.

Despite Sheenagh's view that Irish was akin to a hobby for her, it was a hobby that she pursued with vigor. She had spent hundreds of hours learning the language and had arrived with a conversational ability that impressed the members of the camp. Over time, Sheenagh has become a valued community member, contributing both linguistic and musical knowledge. Her involvement in language classes and immersion events continued well after she sat down for an interview with me in the summer of 2012. Sheenagh is not an anomaly – in 2012, I interviewed five members of the Irish language community that did not have Irish ancestry, and their responses were similar, as I will demonstrate below.

## 2. Background

As of 2011, the Irish language was only spoken daily by 1.8 percent of the population of Ireland outside of its education system ([Central Statistics Office, 2011](#)), and even less amongst the diaspora.<sup>3</sup> Historically, revitalization efforts have shared language ideologies that have coherent and far-reaching influences, shaping the efforts in Ireland and in the diaspora. All participants interact within a language revitalization effort that has historically privileged a connection between the Irish language and an authentic Irish identity, whether they can claim these discourses or not.

These discourses stretch back into the 18th century, due at least in part to the popularity of ideologies that were influenced by JG Herder's concept of the centrality of language to the conception of a people, explained by [Bauman and Briggs \(2000, 174\)](#): "It is the possession of its own distinctive language that constitutes the touchstone of a people or *Volk*, the *sine qua non* of its national identity and spirit". As language became one of the central elements required for a group's claim to nationhood in 19th century Europe, Irish language organizations began to form in recognition both of this fact, and in recognition of the need to mobilize in order to prevent a total shift from Irish to English.

One of the earliest printed arguments in favor of the valorization of Irish depended on supposed links between the Irish language and other ancient languages. An early essay of this type written in 1772 titled *An essay on the antiquity of the Irish language* ([Vallency, 1818](#)) advanced a theory that the language was related to Punic, claiming an ancient connection between the Irish people and the Carthaginians. That these claims were made is pertinent not for their accuracy, but because of the function of the claim at the time. Equipping Ireland's "fundamental touchstone", (its language) with an ancient lineage served as a strong basis upon which to proceed with claims to nationhood. The notion of antiquity still persists as part of a wider

<sup>3</sup> There are 4,354,155 people in Canada that claimed Irish ethnic origins as of 2006 ([Statistics Canada, 2006a](#)), and only 6015 individuals reported speaking any of the "Gaelic languages" in all of Canada ([Statistics Canada, 2006b](#)). Thus, Irish speakers and learners likely comprise a fraction of one percent of the diaspora.

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