ADULT LEARNERS OF IRISH: MOTIVATIONS, METHODS AND MULTILINGUALISM

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Outline of today's talk

◉ Context

◉ Adult learners of Irish, and other minority languages

◉ Factors contributing to success in AMLL

◉ Attitude and motivation among these learners

◉ Language use among L2 adult learners of Irish

◉ Their (perceived) role in Irish language revitalisation

◉ Conclusions

Language status (Policy)

- Irish is the first official language of the state (1922, 1937 constitutions)

- Core curricular subject at primary and secondary levels

- Official Languages Act, 2003

- Official language of the EU, 2007 (full status in Dec 2021)

- Gaeltacht Act, 2012

Language status (CSO, 2017)

- 1.76 million people claim knowledge of the Irish language

- Of these, only 4.2% use it daily outside the education system, 6.3% speak it weekly. The remaining 62.1% speak it less often or never.

- Conversely, 31.7% of those who know Irish speak it daily within the education system.

- In terms of the Gaeltacht (State-designated Irish-speaking regions), the population in these regions is 96,090, of which 66% have the ability to speak Irish, but only 21.4% of them speak it daily.

An Ghaeltacht
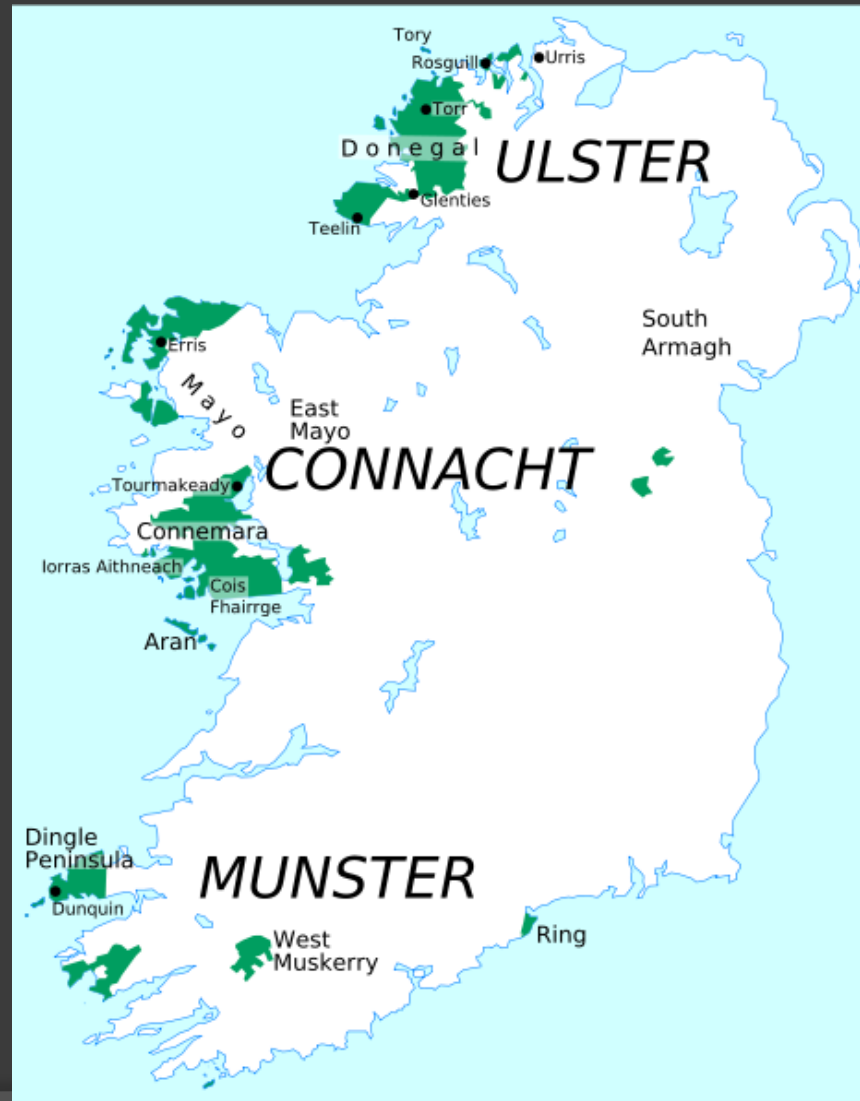
Adult learners

- Adult: 18 yrs and finished with compulsory schooling

- First language(s) acquired, possibly others, potentially 'latent speakers' of minority language (Basham & Fathman (2008) – SLL context.

- They potentially play an important role in LR, by increasing the absolute number of speakers (e.g. Baker et al. 2011).

- A long history of adults learning Irish (e.g. *Conradh na Gaeilge* since the late 19th century)

Impact of Conradh na Gaeilge

- "Níl na coláistí Gaelacha ag déanamh dadaí le cainteoirí Gaeilge a dhéanamh. Agus sin an chéad obair a chaithfeas Conradh na Gaeilge a dhéanamh má tá an Ghaeilig le a theacht chun cinn, caithfidh siad na rudaí atá ag gabhail chun tosaigh sna coláistí Gaeilge a scuabadh ar shiúl agus toiseacht mar is ceart. […] Is rud coitianta daoine cúig samhradh [sic] a chaitheamh ag coláiste Ghaeilge agus ag deireadh an ama sin gan iad bheith ábalta iad féin a choisriceadh i nGaeilig".

(Ó Grianna, 1921)
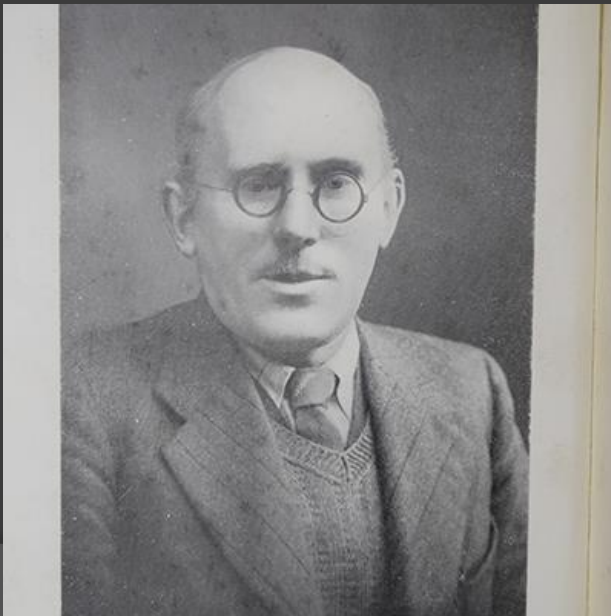
"The Irish colleges are doing nothing to create Irish speakers. And that is the first task of the Gaelic League if Irish is to flourish, they have to put a stop to what is happening in the Irish colleges and start again properly. […] **It is common for people to spend five summers in an Irish college and at the end not be able to bless themselves in Irish**."

Impact of Conradh na Gaeilge, another view

- "The national reawakening, spearheaded by the Gaelic League, and its outgrowth, Coláiste Uladh, the Irish-Language College founded in Gortahork in Donegal in 1906, and the later establishment of the state in 1921, succeeded in significantly retarding the decline of Irish in my area" (Ó Laoire, 2004: 48).

- "Coláiste Uladh and its visitors, professional well-to-do people from urban areas; scholars and academics, including Pearse, Casement, Agnes Farrelly, Henry Morris, J.L. Llyod and others, succeeded in giving Irish a new esteem, in some ways rivalling that of English, a position that it had not enjoyed for at least three centuries. The fact that Irish now had some kind of economic advantage was of central importance to this readjustment in the local attitude" (Ó Laoire, 2004: 49).

Adult Irish language learning today

- There remains a wide variety of contexts (formal and informal) for adult Irish-language learning.

- CnaG still an important provider, but is now augmented by others such as Gaelchultúr and Gael-linn, among others.

- There are also immersion courses for adult learners in many of the Gaeltacht regions, e.g. Oideas-Gael; Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne; and Áras Mháirtín Uí Chadhain

- More formal course/testing types:
Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge; Teastas sa Ghaeilge Ghairmiúil; Dioplóma Iarchéime san Aistriúchán

Adult learners in Irish language Policy

- 'Tabharfar tuilleadh deiseanna do dhaoine fásta ar suim leo an teanga a fhoghlaim nó cur lena gcumas Gaeilge a labhairt. Déanfar clár foghlama Gaeilge a bheidh creidiúnaithe do dhaoine fásta agus déanfaidh sé freastal ar gach leibhéal mar an clár foghlama teanga náisiúnta comhaontaithe.'

  (An Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge, 2010: 16)

- 'Additional opportunities will be afforded to adults interested in learning the language or in increasing their ability to speak Irish. An accredited adult Irish language learning programme, catering for all levels, will be recognised as the agreed national Irish language-learning programme.'

Adult learners in other contexts

- ## An Bhreatain Bheag / Wales

  - well-organized courses for adult learners since the 1960s
  - identified as key agents in language planning
  - Since 2006, six Welsh for Adults Centres around the country to consolidate language provision and to raise standards.
  - A new initiative allows 18-25 year olds to enrol on Welsh courses with the National Centre for Learning Welsh for free

- ## Albain / Scotland

  - far fewer active adult learners of Gaelic is than in Wales
  - a growing recognition of the importance of adult learners
  - adult Gaelic language provision has been described as 'fragmented'

New Speakers and Learners

- *New speakers* are an important group in the Irish context since they make up large portion of active Irish speakers (O'Rourke & Walsh, 2015).

- The point has been made many times that adult L2 speakers are an important cohort within minority language revitalization contexts (Baker et al., 2011; MacCaluim, 2007, McLeod et al., 2010; Nance at al., 2016; Ó hIfearnáin, 2015).

- But, in the Irish context (at least) it is relatively uncommon for L2 learners to go on to become regular users of the language (Walsh & O'Rourke, 2014, cf. Flynn & Harris, 2016).

- But when they do, they generally understand/see their role in the revitalization process (O'Rourke & Walsh, 2015).

Learners = New Speakers?

- L2 learners can become L2 speakers/users, but they are not the same (Cook, 2002)

- Traditional methods which aid the transition: e.g. education system, classes for adults, distance-learning and self-directed learning (Baker, 2011)

- New methods: online self-directed learning, online chat groups, social media, srl.

- Results: L2 learners, bilinguals, new speakers/L2 speakers

- Different language communities?

- Questions: Do learners desire to 'join' a particular group/community or do they have other aims?

Learners → New Speakers?

⦿ Arguments have been made (backed by empirical research) that languages are not always learned for communicative purposes (e.g. Brumfit, 1986; Johnson, 2015).

⦿ Perhaps the case of Irish language learning is not too different:

"Learners with a cultural investment in the Irish language may not be motivated by the desire to integrate into the Irish language speech community. Rather, they may seek the cultural experience associated with language learning and re-investing in their cultural heritage."

(Flynn & Harris, 2016: 382)

The age factor

- A variety of views on the best age to learn a second language

- Most researchers agree that SLA depends on a number of factors, not just age! (e.g. Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2021)

- Accepted by many that younger learners do not have a global advantage over older learners. Younger ≠ better, at least not always (Munoz & Singleton, 2011; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2021; Singleton & Ryan, 2004)

The age factor 2

- Young children have an advantage in SLA when learning in a naturalistic setting with varied and sustained input over time.

- Older children learn faster when the language is learner as a school subject only.

- There is ample evidence that adult learners can achieve a high level of proficiency in a second language, and often do! (see e.g. Birdsong, 2007; Marinova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow, 2000; Moyer, 2014)

Attitude and motivation

- Social-psychological variables are major factors contributing to success in L2 acquisition (Gardner & Lambert, 1959 ↔ Dörnyei, 2019).

- The reasons learners have for engaging with a minority language are varied (Flynn & Harris, 2016).

- Existing studies reveal strong associations between minority language learning and cultural, patriotic and identity-related factors among adults (e.g. Devitt et al., 1983; Flynn, 2020; Flynn & Harris, 2016; MacCaluim, 2007; MacLeod et al., 2015).

Adult learners and their role in LR: interim summary

- Adults learners have some advantages over younger learners, e.g. learning experience, life experience motivation and positive attitude.

- In the right contexts, they can learn a second language quickly.

- Their attitude and motivation, coupled with their understanding of theirt role in LR, is important for helping them achieve a level of proficiency that will allow them to transition from learner to speaker.

- If they do make the transition, they will increase the stock of language speakers of the threatened language,

Attitude and motivation

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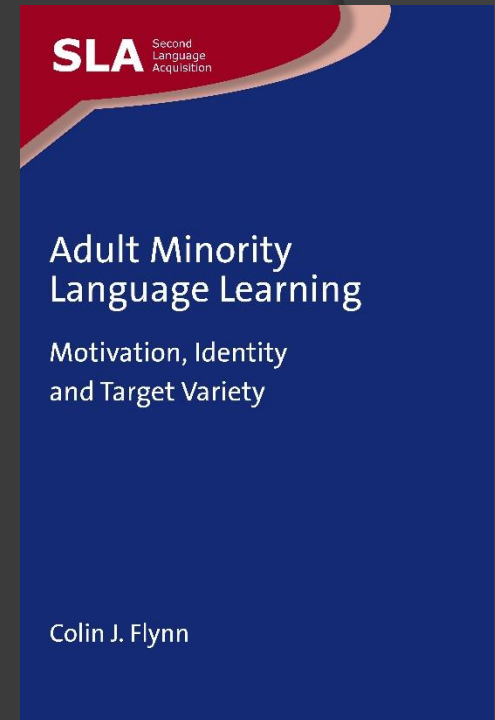# Some recent research: Methods and participants (Flynn, 2020)

- A three stage process:

  Questionnaire (N=157),

  Speech Evaluation Task (n=31)

  Semi-structured interviews (n=31)

- Participants were 'active learners'.

- Varying levels of proficiency & from varied backgrounds (A2-C1; Irish, Spanish, Dutch, srl.)

Research design

- Methodology: a three stage 'sequential explanatory strategy' (Creswell, 2009) - Quant→ qual:

Questionnaire ➡ Speech evaluation ➡ Interview

(Quant.)   (Quant.)   (qual.)

⬅ ⬅ ⬅ ⬅   ⬅ ⬅ ⬅ ⬅

explain   explain
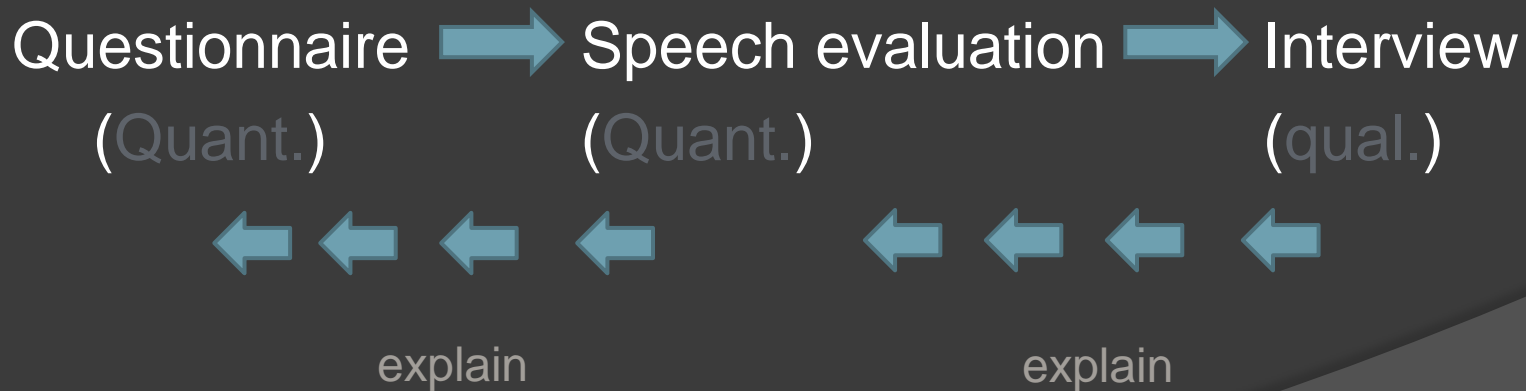
Attitude and motivation

Scales	Mean	SD	Cronbach Alpha
Integrativeness scales (AMTB based)			
Attitude to Irish speakers	6.15	.64	.73
Integrative orientation to Irish	5.47	1.12	.73
Other Scales (AMTB based)			
Instrumental orientation to Irish	4.50	1.37	.61
Non-AMTB based scales			
Identity/Self-concept	6.27	.74	.76
Aims and goals	6.16	.77	.74
Attitude to learning dialects of Irish	4.64	1.14	.68
Cultural activities and preferences	3.46	1.36	.72
Speaking performance self confidence	1.62*	0.20	.68

Do they speak Irish?

Responses to selected statements in the *Self confidence in speaking scale*	Percentages (N=157)	
	True	False
Positively worded statements		
'I speak Irish as often as possible.'	58.6	41.4
'I speak in Irish to my classmates in the Irish classroom.'	92.8	7.2
'I speak in Irish to my classmates outside of the Irish classroom.'	74.2	25.8
Negatively worded statements		
'Speaking Irish in public makes me uncomfortable.'	29.7	70.3
'I feel uncomfortable speaking Irish to people who have better Irish than I do.'	48.1	51.9

What are their general goals?

- On the whole, these learners want to achieve a high level of proficiency in Irish, maybe to the level of a native speaker, but they expressed doubt regarding their ability, as adult learners, to achieve this:

'I don't think it is possible for a flat *Jackeen* to ever sound like a native speaker. You can get near it, but you'll never sound like the real thing.' (Participant 5)

'I would have decided long ago that [sounding like a native speaker] will never be possible. And I doubt if that can be achieved by anyone other than somebody who grew up in a nearly complete Irish environment.' (Participant 23)

Speech models?

- Seven (of 31) learners said that they spoke one of the main regional dialects of Irish (Munster = 2, Connacht= 3, Ulster = 2)

- However, the majority felt that their spoken Irish did not adhere to the norms of any traditional variety of Irish:

  'I think I have a bastardized Irish. My current teacher is from Ulster and I've probably picked up some things appropriate to the northern part of [Ireland]. I think the very first teacher I had in national (primary) school came from Clare. I know my wife points out to me that I'm inclined to put a '*do' before the aimsir chaite* (past tense), which I think is a characteristic of the southern part of the country, but I imagine that by the time I got to secondary school it was the *Caighdeán* (Standard). I don't really know the answer to that question, but I'd imagine that it's a mixture of everything and anything and dominated by the *Caighdeán*.' (Participant 23)

Opportunities for use?

⦿ Many of the learners claimed that they do not have adequate opportunities to speak Irish outside the classroom:

'Just one person, who is an Irish teacher, she's be a friend of my mother's and she's not a native speaker and her Irish is very learned.' (Participant 6)

'No, not really. It is mostly passive ... listening to the Irish television or listening to the news in Irish. It would only be one friend of mine who has a reasonable knowledge of Irish and I only speak to him for the most part. One tends to be lazy and if you meet people in English speaking contexts then it doesn't happen.' (Participant 5)

'I have a number of friends, half a dozen or so, in Dublin who I know speak some Irish. We'll trade a few words, and then we'll slip back into English. When I was in Kerry, obviously it was easier to use it more, and so when I went to the pub I would try as much as possible to speak in Irish, but here in Dublin, not too much.' (Participant 28)

Opportunities for use?

- As a result of the lack of opportunities for true communicative language use, many learners turn to the media for additional input and to use their language skills:

'Yeah I do. I always check what's on TG4. Occasionally, I try and watch the news to improve my Irish, so that I can get the vocabulary and a fair idea of what it's about. I try, with very little success, to read Gaelscéal. I want to know what's going on in the world of Irish. [...] I kind want to be informed about that. It's a subpart of Irish life that I'd like to be knowledgeable about.' (Participant 16)

Do they belong to a group?

- In response to a question about whether they feel like they are a member of a particular group when they speak Irish: Irish; Irish speakers:

- **Learners** (Nine in total provided statements in response to the question.)

'Oh yeah. Enthusiastic, 'wanna be' Irish speakers. Not so much the Connemara or the Kerry or the Donegal speakers, but the Dublin or areas like. The enthusiastic speakers who want to learn the language, but are not fluent in it, I suppose.' (Participant 2)

'I'd be very aware that I am not a native speaker.' (Participant 6)

'Learners! I'd be ambitious. I know where I want to get to, but I'm not there yet.' (Participant 10)

'Yes, I feel I'm in a club, but I don't feel I'm quite a member yet.' (Participant 27)

Multilingualism and Irish-Language Learning

* In 2020 study, 107 (68%) of the 157 participants reported that they spoke at least one language other than Irish or English. (Many of whom reported that they learned local language(s) while living in non-English speaking countries (Flynn, 2020).

* There is evidence of at least some adult migrants learning Irish (for various reasons) after their arrival in the country (Flynn, forthcoming; Flynn & Harris, 2016; McCubbins, 2008) – some of not all are already bi-/multilingual.

* Research by Ní Dhiorbháin et al. (2023) shows that some migrants choose Irish-medium education for children due to an interest in multilingualism and that partners' interest in the language is a factor.

Frameworks for further research

- '**L2 self-concept**' (e.g. Dörnyei, 2009; Mercer, 2011): The image one holds of him/herself, at present and in the future, and the role of the L2 in that image.

- '**Affordances**' (e.g. Singleton and Aronin , 2007; Aronin and Singleton, 2010): Opportunities which exist in the environment to accomplish a language-related action or behaviour. Affordances only exist if they are percieved!

Conclusions

* There are a number of learners whose language learning goals are not linked to becoming part of a traditional speech community.

* Some, due to their current level of proficiency, do not feel that they belong to the Irish language speech community (yet). They are learners, and that is the group they belong to.

* L2 speakers play an important role in strategies to increase the number of regular Irish speakers and minority languages more generally. However, not all L2 learners are seeking to become L2 speakers!

* Accordingly, we must account for aspects of learning which relate to the self when planning courses (goals, target speech models, possible/desired contexts for use, etc.)

* We should help learners recognise, create and seize opportunities for language use which are aligned with their self-image and goals.

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