

**Experiencing Language Policy:
A Discourse Analysis of Reddit Comment Threads on r/ireland**

A Capstone submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English (Linguistics)

by

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San Francisco, California

Spring 2026

Abstract

This capstone project explores how ideologies about Irish language education are expressed by residents of Ireland through a discourse analysis of three online comment threads on Reddit, a forum-style social media platform. In this study, 530 data points consisting of posts and comments from the r/ireland community were collected to identify individuals' personal experiences learning Irish through the education system. Furthermore, these comments were categorized into separate thematic groupings.

Drawing on discourse analysis (DA) methods, this project builds on scholarship in reversing language shift (RLS), language learning in language revitalization contexts, and Irish language attitudes in an attempt to outline the relationship between the goals of the current national Irish language policy of Ireland, and former students' experiences with the Irish language education system. Analysis of online discourse on the topic suggested that there is a divergence between the two, revealing that Ireland's reliance on the education system as a means to revive the Irish language has not yet been effective in producing a significant number of daily speakers.

I. Introduction

A. The Irish Language and The 20 Year Strategy

Due to the brutal, ongoing British occupation of Ireland, the number of speakers of the Irish language has seen a significant decrease in recent history. Though the occupation began in the late 1100s, the linguistic genocide of Irish was most stark due to the Great Famine (1845-1851). This historical event was the primary catalyst for the decline of the Irish language, as Ireland's population fell from 8 million to 6.5 million due to widespread death, disease, and emigration (Census Commissioners, 1856 p. xii; Ceallaigh, 2015). Irish was still spoken by the majority of the population in the beginning of the 17th century, but as the population dwindled, so did the vitality of the language. By 1881 it was the native tongue of only 28.4% of the population, demoting the language to minority language status (Bradley, 2014). The Gaeltacht regions on the West coast of Ireland were hardest hit by famine related deaths, as most of the land was being used for agriculture at the time.

Moreover, many residents of these areas lived in poverty, making them most vulnerable.

These areas did and still do have high concentrations of fluent, daily Irish speakers, though there are not nearly as many as there once were. A large portion of these populations either died or emigrated to other countries in search of a new life, taking the language with them.

Even prior to the Great Famine, British colonial forces attempted to erase Irish from the country's linguistic landscape during the 17th century, through rigid language policies that banned Irish from being taught in schools and spoken by students and utilizing corporal punishment for those who did not comply (Ceallaigh, 2015). Additionally, English was established as the language of instruction in schools across the country during this era, forcing students to learn and speak English in their everyday lives. English was increasingly being used as the language of government, business, and commerce, ultimately causing it to take precedence over Irish.

In response to the decline of the Irish language, an organization called the Gaelic League, established in 1893, began to advocate for the revival of the language, developing bilingual programs and language curriculum designed for implementation within an independent Irish state (Hyland & Milne, 1987). However, these efforts were overshadowed by Ireland's struggle for independence. Influenced by pressures from the Gaelic League, the establishment of the Free State of Ireland in 1922 (presently called the Republic of Ireland) set the beginnings of official language planning in favor of Irish language revival. Calls for revival underscored the importance of preserving the Irish language as a symbol of a liberated national and cultural identity. Thus, Irish was declared as the national language of Ireland under Article 4 of the Constitution of the Irish Free State

(Saorstát Eireann) Act (1922), alongside English, and by the mid-1930s Irish was an obligatory requirement in all primary schools (Walsh, 2023).

Continuing the ongoing efforts to revitalize the Irish language, the government of the Republic of Ireland published a document in 2010 called *The 20 Year Strategy* with the intent of increasing “the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language”, promoting Irish as a language that could be used in various spheres of everyday social life (Government of Ireland, 2010). Written in English, the document outlines a number of policies aimed at expanding Irish language education, expanding the language's role in public services (i.e. radio and television), and rejuvenating the Gaeltacht regions. The strategy was designed with the aim of increasing the number of proficient, daily speakers of Irish Gaelic outside of the educational system from 72,000 in 2006 to 250,000 by 2028 (Government of Ireland, 2010). The government targeted the educational system as a key method of language revival to achieve this goal, mandating that Irish be taught as a mandatory subject in primary, secondary, and Leaving Certificate level. The latest census data from 2022 shows that daily Irish speakers outside of the education system nationally numbered 71,968, which is only about 1.4% of the population (Central Statistics Office, 2025). Despite the widespread implementation and further development of Irish language curriculum, these numbers clearly fall short of the goals that were previously established.

Mandatory Irish language education has been somewhat negatively received by the country's residents. Recent research indicates that the teaching of Irish in schools has faced many challenges, namely lack of individual motivation to learn Irish, lack of opportunities to speak Irish outside of schools, and negative attitudes towards the way it is taught (Newhall, 2024; Pecnikova & Slatinska, 2019). In this research study, I aim to further

explore how people on the ground talk about their experiences in Irish language classrooms to discover the main attitudes that people have towards the teaching of Irish in primary through Leaving Certificate schooling of Ireland. I hope to discover if and how it is that these efforts are perceived through the findings of this research.

B. Purpose and Scope

The present study investigates the range of attitudes that emerge on Reddit in individuals' evaluations of personal experiences surrounding obligatory Irish language education in Ireland, and how this discourse reveals a mismatch in the aims of the Irish government's language policy, as outlined in the 20 Year Strategy. To explore this topic, I analyze user comments from three separate forum posts from "r/ireland" that discuss this topic using discourse analysis (DA) frameworks. Close evaluation of recurring words, phrases and themes in the data revealed that forum participants had differing experiences and opinions about learning Irish in schools. Findings are highlighted through a content-based thematic analysis and categorization of commenter data, exploring netizens' lived experiences of the Irish government's language planning initiatives. Although these forum posts are just a fragment of the broader conversation about people's attitudes towards the Irish language, my findings speak to broader questions about the impact of overreliance on education as the primary means for language revitalization.

The following sections of this paper provide background on language revitalization frameworks, Reversing Language Shift (RLS) frameworks, previous research on Irish language attitudes, and analyses of language ideologies as they are expressed in online platforms. Next, I discuss and define the methodologies used to conduct the study, as well as principles of corpus selection and theme categorization. I then analyze and present

relevant data samples, revealing three recurrent themes that were echoed across the forum postings: *There is a systemic issue with the teaching of Irish in schools; Don't just blame schools, don't just blame teachers; and I enjoyed learning Irish in school.* Section V discusses the divergence between the aims of Irish education policy and what people are saying about their experiences of learning in the education system, how other language revitalization groups can benefit from these findings, and limitations of the study. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary of key frameworks and findings of the study, as well as areas for future research.

II. Background

A. Language Revitalization and Reversing Language Shift (RLS)

The widespread decline and loss of minority languages is a tragic consequence of European settler colonialism and the displacement of indigenous communities around the world. The establishment of nations and borders involved declaration of 'national' languages, wherein colonial tongues, such as English, became the languages of commerce, government and education spoken by those in power. Threats to the physical survival and well-being of indigenous populations has, in turn, pushed many indigenous languages toward extinction and endangerment (Crystal, 2002). The present day situation of language loss is dire; roughly 44% of the world's languages are classified as endangered as of 2025 (Ethnologue, 2025). The attrition of global linguistic diversity represents more than just a loss of words, but also indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. The impact on the speakers themselves is deeply personal; "inside [these] communities, there are complex, varied feelings and reactions, which include the loss of their own sense of identity" (Hinton et al., 2018; p. 1).

Despite this, communities have continually worked against language shift, choosing to learn and teach Indigenous languages as an act of resistance, a way to work toward reversing language shift, and to join broader decolonization efforts (Lukaniec & Palakurthy, 2022). These community-led initiatives inspired the language revitalization (LR) movement, which is dedicated to giving “new life and vigor” to languages with declining speaker bases (Hinton et al., 2018). Before its establishment as a field in academia, LR grew from the efforts of indigenous communities to preserve, document and revive their ancestral tongues that date back to the 1960s, though these efforts were largely overlooked within academia until more recently (Chambers, 2015). As academic research interest in endangered languages grew in the 1980s and 90s, so did calls for researchers to contribute to their survival, resulting in increased efforts from linguists and communities alike (Hinton et al., 2018).

The task of reviving an endangered language back into daily use is no easy task. One notable scholar that has shaped present day understandings of language revival and preservation methods is Joshua Fishman. First proposed by Fishman in 1991, Reversing Language Shift (RLS) is a theoretical framework for language planning that “[...] is devoted to improving the sociolinguistic circumstances of languages that suffer from a prolonged negative balance of users and uses” (Fishman, 2012). Fishman emphasizes the importance of language revitalization efforts to speak the language in the home among families as a key method to effectively produce new speakers. Frameworks suggest that bilingual schooling for children combined with language classes for adult learners are the best ways to facilitate the intergenerational transmission of the target language.

Warning that overreliance on educational institutions as the sole means for revitalization should be avoided, Fishman points to the case of the Irish language as an example of these outcomes. Despite the fact that Irish has been a mandatory subject in the national school system for decades, he notes that institutional efforts have failed to create a significant number of proficient Irish speakers. Consequently, Irish has become an occasional, formal second language among middle class individuals, rather than as a mother tongue and informal medium among members of Irish society (Fishman, 2012). He argues that the language will remain in schools until it is able to be used casually in the various spheres of a student's life, emphasizing the importance of coordination between home-school-community spheres for learning to be most effective.

B. Language Attitudes and Ideologies

Spanning nearly a century of inquiry, individuals' attitudes and ideologies towards language have been the subject of study by researchers from a range of disciplines, such as sociology, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, with the aim of discovering the social meanings that people assign to language, speech varieties and their users (Dragojevic et al., 2021). Thus, language attitudes refer to the specific, evaluative beliefs people express about language, which are further tied to and rooted in language ideologies. In the context of language revitalization, Dołowy-Rybińska and Hornsby (2022) define language ideologies as the shared beliefs and feelings used to make sense of different linguistic forms (i.e. dialects vs. standard languages or minority vs. majority languages), and reasonings for why certain varieties are perceived as more legitimate than others. Traditional approaches to uncovering these meanings typically involve direct methods of elicitation, such as

interviews, questionnaires, and surveys, and indirect methods to reveal subconscious beliefs, like the matched guise test (Kircher & Zipp, 2022). Alternatively, the societal treatment approach allows for analysis of language attitudes through ethnographic observation of how language is represented in public discourse, which is more aligned with the approach taken in the present paper.

Previous investigations of attitudes towards whole languages within minority speech communities has revealed a complex web of existing beliefs and opinions. The findings of Lee (2009) highlight the influence of competing language ideologies among Navajo youth regarding the instrumental value of English and the cultural importance of preserving Navajo. While participants valued Navajo as important to their identity and culture, many parents prioritized speaking English at home due to its association with positive socio-economic outcomes. This mixed messaging can affect perceptions about the utility and future of their heritage language, wherein “[national] discourses of profit are reproduced alongside local discourses of pride, leading to a sense of ambivalence among youth” (Rosa & Burdick, 2017; p. 114) .

The impact of these attitudes on the success of revitalization efforts is further detailed by Dołowy-Rybińska and Hornsby (2022) in their claim that successful language revitalization hinges on communities and their views on the value of their language. They argue that it is nearly impossible to implement a successful revival plan if the people involved do not have a positive connection with it, necessitating a shift towards the framing of not only language revitalization, but also language reclamation in relation to identity and culture. In turn, negative or indifferent emotions directly impact learner success and the

motivation to use the language. When a language is seen as a localized school subject with little utility rather than a tool for active communication, the learner's linguistic agency to use the language at their discretion is diminished (Lukaniec and Palakurthy, 2022). Ultimately, language planners should address these underlying ideologies to ensure revitalization efforts succeed.

C. Language Ideologies in Online Discourse

Presently, there is a growing body of research regarding the construction of language ideologies via online platforms that illuminate digital platforms as important sites for the negotiation of linguistic value, making content rich for analysis. Qian (2024) utilized Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) frameworks to examine comments from Facebook and other internet forums regarding parental language ideologies about their bilingual and multilingual children. The findings of the study highlighted the conflicting views of parents on teaching their children global languages as a tool for economic and academic success, and views of teaching the language as a vital link to cultural identity.

Newhall (2024) examined attitudes towards the Irish language utilizing qualitative ethnographic interviews paired with observations of digital discourse from Reddit, Discord, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter). Newhall identifies various recurring expressions made by users, such as a lack of motivation to learn the language, limited engagement with Irish outside of educational environments, and widespread concerns regarding the overall inadequacy of the Irish education system (Newhall, 2024). Findings indicated that although the Irish language is widely regarded as a symbol of culture and identity, there is a prevalent belief that it lacks function and relevance in daily life.

In a similar vein, Lee and Su (2019) investigated how language ideologies are constructed in online spaces through a thematic analysis of the comments section of a video on Youtube depicting a verbal confrontation in Taiwan. The video involved a Taiwanese-American passenger attacking a local driver in English, sparking debates over identity and the appropriate language use. Utilizing similar thematic analysis frameworks to these three studies, the present study explores relevant narratives of experiences learning the Irish language via Ireland's national education system to reveal the recurring attitudes that underlie them.

III. Methodology

A. Research Design: *Discourse Analysis*

This study utilizes discourse analysis (DA) frameworks to conduct a thematic content analysis of the selected Reddit forums. At a basic level, DA is the systematic and deliberate activity of identifying and interpreting patternings of language (Trappes-Lomax, 2004). Traditionally, formal approaches have focused on the linguistic structure of texts or conversations to understand the organization of discourse. In contrast, functional and social approaches focus on language in use, beyond the sentence level, through the lens of semiotics and pragmatics to understand how language users signal stance and ideology (Jones, 2024). As digital communication has become abundant over the last several decades, discourse analysis has increasingly been utilized as a tool to investigate language in online media (e.g. Wortham & Reyes, 2020). Building upon the functional and social traditions, I use DA to look at how natural language is used in the forums to reveal

commenters' attitudes and ideologies towards the learning of Irish. This is a more indirect methodology aimed at getting similar information as ethnographic interviews and surveys.

Methods of this study are also guided by Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) approaches. There are four levels of linguistic analysis in CMDA: structure, meaning, interaction management, and social behavior (Herring, 2018; p. 2). Thus, the present study looks primarily at the 'meaning' level of selected comments to study the attitudes and opinions expressed within them, and not discursive interactions and replies. Moreover, Herring (2004) defined CMDA as "language-focused content analysis," which can be "purely qualitative—observations of discourse phenomena in a sample of text may be made, illustrated, and discussed—or quantitative phenomena may be coded and counted" (p. 344). While frequencies of linguistic features or words were not considered in the present research, descriptive numbers about the number of comments that matched each thematic category are included (Table 2).

B. Corpus Selection and Scope: *Reddit*

Reddit is an online social media discussion website with 100,000+ active communities and 121+ million daily unique visitors, wherein users can freely post photos, thoughts, opinions, and commentary on various topics. (Reddit, Inc., 2026). These topics are organized into communities called "subreddits" that discuss various topics such as news, politics, and popular culture. The website is designed for users to submit posts to these subreddits that contain a title, along with a written body of text or external link. The format is set up so that users can reply to these postings and take part in the discussion of topics they are interested in, creating a discussion tree of nested replies of ongoing

conversation (Medvedev et al., 2017).

To find forum posts relevant to my research question, I navigated to the r/ireland subreddit homepage and searched for the keywords *'Irish language education'*, all in one string of words. The search inquiry was worded to be as specific as possible, as there are a lot of forum postings on the subreddit that discuss the Irish language itself. This initial search returned a long list of potential posts, from which I ultimately selected three forum posts to extract the textual data from, as seen below in Table 1. These posts have been archived since being posted, meaning that no new comments can be posted and votes cannot be cast.

Forum post #	Title of Forum Post	# of Comments	Date posted	Latest Reply
#1	The state of teaching the Irish language in schools is abysmal. : r/ireland	<i>174 total</i>	March 2nd, 2025	March 7th, 2025
#2	As a non-Irish person, I always wanted to ask why exactly Irish language education does not seem to go well for lots of people in Ireland: r/ireland	<i>232 total</i>	November 5th, 2021	November 19th, 2021
#3	The Irish Language is often cited as being taught badly. Is this the fault of the curriculum or decades or poor teacher training ? We have heard this defence about the language for decades when people say it's useless language. : r/ireland	<i>124 total</i>	September 20th, 2021	September 20th, 2021

Table 1: Selected Reddit Forum Postings

The dataset was chosen to maximize three factors: recency of original post, number of total comments, and relevance of the content of the forum post to the research question. Each post had been posted in the last five years, and all three had over 100 comments to ensure that there would be a range of opinions to analyze. Relevancy of the forum posts was determined based on the original poster's description of or inquiry into encounters learning Irish via Ireland's education system.

C. Textual Sampling

In this study, a total of 530 comments (i.e. data samples) were collected from selected Reddit forums to identify and illustrate recurrent discourse phenomena within commenters' evaluations of Irish language education. All comments for each Reddit post were manually copied and pasted into a spreadsheet, creating an easily accessible mini-corpus consisting of the lexical content of selected posts. The initial corpus construction involved deleting user-interface text (e.g. permalink, save, share) and removing blank values that naturally occur during the data extraction process. Next, I separated the remaining values into two columns: one for commenters' usernames and one for the comments. While usernames were collected to distinguish between unique Reddit users for analysis purposes, they have been omitted from this paper to ensure anonymity. In the data presentation section, longer comments were shortened for the sake of brevity, and a portion of them were modified to correct spelling, and to obscure curse words for clarity.

Observation and evaluation of comments was guided by Qian (2024), which first treats digital comments as individual narratives and discrete units to understand what they

mean, and secondarily labels them based on recurring themes. In order to understand netizens' attitudes towards Irish language learning, I prioritized analyzing informative anecdotes from individuals who indicated lived experience with the Irish education system, such as former students, teachers and parents. Personal experience was evaluated on the basis of commenters overtly referencing their personal experiences, (using language like *in my experience*) or usage of first-person pronouns to position themselves as a part of the in-group of former Irish language students.

D. Theme Identification and Categorization

Following initial observation to determine the meaning of the Reddit comments, they were then systematically categorized into broader thematic groupings. To aid my observational processes, I first did an informal preliminary process of coding relevant comments into a sentiment category; negative, positive, mixed, and ambivalence. These sentiment categories are not outlined in the data analysis section because they were not relevant to the final outcomes of the project. Following Lee and Su (2019) in their thematic categorization of main language ideologies, I then categorized comments by identifying recurring opinions based on the collective patterns found across separate data points. By categorizing individual narratives into the broader ideological themes, the data analysis provides an exploration into the attitudes and ideologies circulating in the r/ireland community. Focusing mainly on those who describe their personal experiences in Irish language classrooms, I aim to discover how individuals' experiences in Irish language classrooms reflect the goals of the 20 Year Strategy. Ultimately, three primary themes were established (Table 2); *There is a systemic issue with the teaching of Irish in schools; Don't just*

blame schools, don't just blame teachers; and I enjoyed learning Irish in school. Additionally, in some cases, content of the data samples was complex as some of them showed to have multiple themes embedded within them, and therefore may have been counted in multiple categories.

IV. Data Analysis

In the following sections, I will present data samples consisting of comments from current and former students, teachers, and parents about their beliefs about and experiences with learning Irish via the public education system in Ireland. In many data samples, commenters are identifying what their biggest issues were in learning Irish, and speculating on how the situation can be improved. The majority of comments were written in English, but there were a few comments containing short phrases in Irish. In analyzing the data, I found there were three main themes expressed in comments of the selected forum postings, as seen in the table below. These themes are shown to overlap at times, where one comment has multiple themes embedded within it.

	Main Themes	Number of Instances	Sample Comment
1	There is a systemic issue with the teaching of Irish in schools	114	<i>"[Irish] isn't taught very well. If you don't have a grá for the language, it's quite difficult to get into it. We are taught how to say words and how to pass an exam and that's it. We aren't taught to really speak it at all."</i>
2	Don't just blame schools, don't just blame teachers	58	<i>"As an Irish person and an English language teacher, it doesn't go well because of the way that it's taught combined with the fact that the majority of homes speak English at home. [...]"</i>

	Main Themes	Number of Instances	Sample Comment
3	I enjoy(ed) learning Irish in school	24	<i>[...] It's [been] awhile since I was in school but it was certainly taught as a dedicated Irish language class, back then. I was fortunate to have a good Irish teacher at second level, and indeed it was taught well at primary level too. I loved Irish as a subject.</i>

Table 2: Main Themes

A. THEMATIC GROUPINGS

Analysis of forum data revealed three primary, recurring themes among commenters; *There is a systemic issue with the teaching of Irish in schools, Don't just blame schools, don't just blame teachers, and I enjoy(ed) learning Irish.* For one, users repeatedly pointed to problems within the Irish education system as the reason for their lack of Irish or poor experience in school. Commenters routinely voiced complaints about the Irish language curriculum, such as the rote memorization of texts and vocabulary for the sake of passing exams, while other users in this category complained about the teachers they had in school. Secondly, participants often pointed to a lack of support for Irish outside of the classroom, explaining that there are limited spaces where Irish is spoken, or that it is not spoken enough at home among families. In contrast to these challenges, a minority of users shared positive experiences, highlighting the pivotal role of their passionate educators in shaping their classroom experience.

1. There is a systemic issue with the teaching of Irish in schools

1.1 Problems with curriculum

The main overarching theme that came up in the data was the belief that there is a systemic issue with the way Irish is taught in schools. Some expressed this without elaborating, while others pointed to specific problems that they believe hindered their learning experience.

1.1.2 Too much reading, too little speaking

Reddit users who were students in Irish classrooms frequently expressed issues with the way Irish is taught, saying that the curriculum used to teach it strongly contributed to their dislike of learning the language in school. Users recounted that there was a severe underemphasis of speaking and conversational practice in the higher levels of schooling, and a strong overemphasis on the reading and analysis of Irish literature, poems, and short stories. Many aired their grievances that even if they could speak some Irish when they were in school, they can't speak any Irish at all now because of this, despite taking the required Irish classes for over a decade. A few former students described that in primary school, students are taught basic vocabulary and expressions to converse about day to day life, but they felt that this did not set them up to be able to do the complex literary analyses expected in secondary school. This was a common theme among commenters, as shown in data sample 1A.

(1A) The biggest issue I found in school was the literacy of Irish... We would spend more time learning to read and write in Irish (something I personally struggled with) than actually speaking it. We had to learn off poetry and short stories but it was all about committing them to memory rather than learning language skills from it.

[I] will openly admit to not being able to string a sentence together that isn't memorised. If I

spent that long learning anything else I could at least half arse by now. [...]

Multiple individuals also gave insight about the content of the reading material itself, recalling that much of the material they read in Irish class was boring, outdated, and not engaging. One author that was brought up a total of six times was Peig Sayers, a famed Irish storyteller and writer from the late 18th and early 19th century (Coughlan, 2007). Growing up on the Blasket Islands off of the rugged West coast of Ireland, much of her work was about her difficult life there. Her name was typically mentioned without much follow up, but with an implication that her work was not fun to read. Similar themes of struggle and strife are seemingly common amongst other Irish literature and media that students were made to study in school. The Reddit user from data sample 1B recounts that the works they studied in school were depressing and uninspiring, providing two examples. The works mentioned were *Caca Milis*, a 2001 Irish short film about a blind man on a train who dies at the end, and *Gafa*, a 1996 novel about a 17 year old heroin addict.

(1B) [...] it's [...] a bit of the teachers or just the education system in general. They all play a part in this problem. [...] And why do we only study depressing material?

Caca milis - a blind man is murdered because a woman was inconvenienced

Gafa - a family is torn apart because the husband is cheating on the school secretary and the son dies of an overdose and the husband and the secretary attend the son's funeral as a couple.

These don't inspire me to read or watch material in Irish. [...]

1.1.3 Issues with exams and rote learning

Another issue with the Irish language curriculum that numerous commenters voiced was the forced memorization and rote learning of Irish texts. A lot of users recall that they

had to memorize bodies of texts for the purpose of passing exams, pointing to this as one of the main reasons they hated their Irish classes growing up. A total of five data samples contained specific phrasing along the lines of “*We’re not taught Irish as a language, we’re taught how to pass an Irish exam*”. Many users said that they were made to memorize these texts, sometimes not even understanding what it was that they were reading and memorizing, as stated in data sample 1C.

(1C) Memorisation is the entire thing [...]. We were told to learn it off and it was the only way for us to get a good grade for most of the class since we simply didn't have the time to catch up to the exam in the time allowed so learning it off is a better strategy for most students. It isn't just learning off plurals, it is full lengths of text that people write and don't understand. [...]

The issue of memorization was mentioned about Irish exams in general, but there is one exam in particular that was repeatedly discussed in each of the forum posts; the final exam for students’ Leaving Certificate (LC) years. These are the last two years of students’ schooling before they graduate and go on to university, comparable to American students’ final year of high school. The Leaving Certificate exam is a cumulative examination of students’ post-primary education, covering a variety of subjects such as English, math, and Irish. Students must pass the exam in order to attend university, and many recalled having to memorize a lot of information for the Irish section of this exam. The user in data sample 1D describes this test as “a test of memory”, similar to the way students described doing this for other exams.

(1D) [...] Irish is taught the same way as English once you reach secondary school. Especially from 5th year onwards. The curriculum focuses on analysing poems and stories, which often have multiple meanings. Irish is an extremely complex language, so this is obviously extremely difficult.

The Irish leaving cert is essentially a test of memory. It’s a matter of cramming an ungodly

amount of content into your brain and excreting it onto the page on the day of the exam. [...]

I'm not the only person to say this on this thread, but I learned more French in five years than Irish in 11. The method of teaching is all wrong.

Similar to the user in data sample 1D, Reddit users also often compared the teaching of Irish to the teaching of other languages. Many expressed that they achieved higher proficiency in languages they studied for four to five years, such as French, German or Spanish, than in Irish, which they studied for eleven or more. People, especially in Forum post #2, repeatedly voiced their opinion that Irish should be taught more like these foreign languages, which focused on conversational skills. In contrast, Irish was taught with an emphasis on literary analysis, treating the language as a subject of study (similar to English Literature) rather than a useful communication tool. A couple of users expressed that to teach Irish as a foreign language would not make sense, as it is not a foreign language to Ireland. However, there were conflicting narratives about this, as there were a few who said languages are taught poorly overall in Ireland, and that the whole system needs improvement.

1.2: Teachers are the problem

Curriculum issues aside, many Reddit users cited Irish language teachers as being uniquely bad at teaching Irish. Some did not elaborate on this, while others went into depth about experiences with their own teachers. At times, Irish teachers were characterized as not being passionate about or motivated to teach the language, in turn impeding students' interest in the language. There were a couple of commenters who reported having teachers that had bad attitudes, describing them as being overly mean or strict, and feeling like they

were treated poorly by teachers if they were not good at Irish. A few users pointed to there being a lack of well-trained, quality Irish teachers overall.

Among comments from this theme, the words used to describe teachers were *hardcore*, *awful*, *bad*, and *abysmal*. The commenter in data sample 1E reports that they had a *terrible* teacher in secondary school, causing them to lose their Irish they learned in primary school. However, this comment seems more in line with the complaints made about the curriculum and exam issues in secondary schools (see section 1.1). The user seemingly takes issue with what the teacher was having them do in classes, which they did not feel was relevant to their exams.

(1E) When I was in school the teacher I had for my first 3 years on secondary school was terrible, I had learned a ton more Irish in primary and lost it all when I stepped foot into secondary school, every Irish class we had with her was writing random crap down into our copies which had zero relevance to our exams and other things, highest i ever scored in a test with that teacher was 4 percent.

(1F) [...] I've had experience of several Irish teachers who, while proficient at the language, couldn't teach a dead crow to fall off a telegraph line. That and the method of teaching the curriculum. I did three years of French and my ability to understand and even converse in it almost forty years later far outstrips Irish.

The Reddit user from data sample 1F expressed that they had several Irish teachers who, despite being proficient in Irish, “could not teach a dead crow to fall off a telegraph line”, implying they were not good at teaching. However, they follow up to say that this is not the only issue, but that the method of teaching the curriculum is a problem as well. Data sample 1G reflects this view of Irish teachers, wherein this Reddit user states that even though their teacher loved the language and was knowledgeable about it, they recall that

“he couldn’t teach his way out of a paper bag with a flashlight and a map”, and described him as having a “broken spirit”.

(1G) [...] A great teacher can elevate the teaching beyond the curriculum's huge problems and inspire kids to love the subject (any subject), a mediocre teacher will get it done but no one will love anything, and a bad teacher with a bad curriculum can absolutely kill any chance generations of students had at making a go of what they are expected to learn and regurgitate.

[...] it's not the teacher training particularly, it's the curriculum tools they're given which ties hands [...] Our 6th year Irish teacher was a true student of the language, [...]. His knowledge and love for the language become more clear to me the older I get.

But he couldn't teach his way out of a paper bag with a flashlight and a map. For various reasons, he had a broken spirit. A sadsack of a husk of a human at the time. [...] he talked endlessly to a room completely ignoring him. [...] The system is at fault

In the first part of this comment, the commenter acknowledges the important link between teachers and curriculum, stating their belief that good teachers can go beyond the curriculum to inspire students to like the subject, while bad and mediocre teachers do not do the same. The user goes on to say that “it’s the curriculum tools they’re given which ties hands”, indicating the belief that curriculum is more of a problem than teacher training. This distinction between teachers and curriculum is key to understanding how poor curriculum planning not only affects students, but also teachers and their teaching abilities. This opinion is mirrored later on in this analysis in section 3.1, where a couple of individuals convey that even though they had good teachers, the content of the curriculum used to teach classes was still an issue.

2. Don’t just blame the schools, don’t just blame the teachers

The second most frequent theme that came up in the data were those who described other factors outside of the education system that prevent Irish education from being

effective; the lack of opportunities to speak Irish outside of class, and student motivation levels.

2.1: Applying learning outside of the classroom

A common thread across all of the forums was that Irish language education is ineffective not just because of how it is taught in school, but because it is not spoken enough outside of school. Several of these kinds of comments came from teachers and parents in particular. Commenters repeatedly mentioned that there is a lack of opportunities for students and adults to casually speak and practice their Irish with others. Some suggested that there should be more of these spaces, such as after school clubs and play spaces where children can actively practice their language skills. Some said that even if they did have Irish when they were in school, they lost most of it as adults because they had nowhere to practice it.

There was one place that people repeatedly pointed to as having a lack of Irish; in the home. The key word *parents* came up in twenty-two data samples across the forums, with some people blaming parents specifically for their lack of effort in learning and promoting Irish within the home. A handful of folks stated their belief that there is a real discontinuity with the teaching of Irish in schools and the speaking of Irish in households among family members, exemplified by data sample 2A.

(2A) As a primary school teacher, I see Gaeilge as being in the same boat as Religion. If the kids aren't practicing it or being meaningfully exposed to it in their home lives, then (even with the best teacher in the world) they're going to see it as something they have to put up with for 40 minutes in school and nothing more. The continuity between school and home is an underrated part of a child's education. [...]

(2B) It's easier to blame the schools than ourselves. If we as parents made the effort to introduce Irish as a spoken language at home then it wouldn't feel like such a dead language to our kids in school.

As seen in data sample 2B, one parent expresses that “if we as parents made more of an effort” to speak it with the children, then it would not feel like “such a dead language to our kids”. This comment was the beginning of a thread of replies in Forum #3 wherein another user chimed in to say that a lot of parents “had just as bad of an education in Irish as their children got” and that this is much easier said than done. This narrative feeds back to Theme 1, i.e. the systemic issues of teaching Irish in schools; Irish parents are oftentimes former students themselves. As we have seen in the data, many former students reported not learning or retaining the Irish that they learned in school. This would conceivably make it difficult for former students who then become parents to pass it on to the new generation.

The same commenter from data sample 2B goes on to imply that it is unrealistic to expect parents who work full time to go back and learn Irish. The original poster (OP) replies and asks what the incentive is for parents to teach a language that will “not practically help [their] child”. OP states that they had a poor experience learning Irish and cannot fathom its value, saying that parents and children need a reason to learn Irish. This is echoed in theme 2.2 about how many people do not believe that knowing Irish is a valuable skill, and that they don’t feel that they will need to use it in the real world. The same user from data sample 2B goes on to reply and say that they see the value in it, acknowledging its cultural importance and the importance of language learning in general, stating that parents should be taking blame if their child has the same experience with Irish in school as they did.

2.2: Students' lack of motivation

A few users reported that students in general are simply not motivated to take the time and try to learn the language. These comments mainly came from former students, saying that they personally did not feel that there was any use or value in the language, rather it was just another school subject that they had to pass. Positioning themselves as a current student (at the time of making this comment), the Reddit user in data sample 2C gives key insight into their recent experience of learning Irish. This user makes a point to say that they had good teachers, but even with a good teacher, they don't believe there is any point in learning Irish. They also express that if they could drop the subject, they would as they don't believe it is useful to know. A minor subtheme within this similar vein was users expressing the fact that English is the dominant and most useful language, and that having knowledge of Irish isn't applicable in the real world or useful for getting a job.

(2C) I am a fifth year student. [...] I have a really good Irish teacher, she is completely fluent and isn't some dragon lady like most of the Irish teachers. The reason I don't know how to speak the language is because there is zero point to it. Basically no person in my year gives a f*ck about the language because it is not useful at all. [...] If I could drop Irish, I would. People need to realise that it is not something we will ever need, [...] It is a useless subject by all standards, [...]. This is the same for basically everyone in my year, no one likes the subject, at all. The teachers are far better than you'd believe, I've had a lot of teachers, but never a bad one. We just don't care about it, because it doesn't matter. [...]

Since Irish is a mandatory subject in all schools, some complained about how they were forced to take Irish classes and felt ambivalent towards learning because they had no choice in the matter. This was often mentioned by former students, who felt that the fact Irish is mandatory in school is what led to their decrease in interest in Irish, and students should not be forced to learn a language if they do not have the interest. In a few cases, commenters went as far as to say that the schools are not the problem at all, but the lack of

effort that people put into studying Irish is the real issue. These comments used phrasing indicating that if people had tried harder in school, then they would be better at Irish now and it is on students to spend time studying the language.

3. I enjoyed learning Irish in school

3.1: *I loved learning Irish, I had great teachers*

In contrast to earlier themes, there were a number of comments in the forums where former students indicated that they had a good experience of learning Irish in school. Commenters in this theme used words like *superb* and *fantastic* to describe their teachers. The Reddit user from data sample 3A reports having a *passionate* teacher who taught them to love the language. The user states that because of this teacher, they have “more than *cúpla focal* in [their head]”; *Cúpla focal* is an Irish phrase that refers to the symbolic or tokenistic knowledge of a few basic Irish words or phrases, literally translating to *a few words* (Brennan & O'Rourke, 2019). Here, the user is using this phrase to indicate that they remember more than just the basics, enough to converse with their niece. They also mention their niece is in *Gaelscoil*, which are schools that teach through an Irish-medium, likely meaning that she can speak Irish pretty well.

(3A) In secondary school we had a passionate, old school Irish teacher from Kerry who taught us to love the language in a genuine way. As a result, I still thankfully have more than *cupla focal* in my head and actually talk to my *Gaelscoil* niece on Instagram in Irish of all things. [...]

Mr Welsh, thank you for being such an amazing teacher. I may have forgotten some of the things you taught me. But I'll never forget you. [...]

(3B) From my own experience I've worked with some fabulous Irish teachers, so when I hear it's “taught badly”, I feel such remorse for those teachers. My own Irish teachers were grand—they taught to the exam so a lot of learning by heart, and who can blame them. I worked hard and had a good standard of Irish when I left secondary school in 2010. The reason my Irish is poor now is because I haven't made any real effort to use it since.

As described by the Reddit user in data sample 3B, this individual remembers having *fabulous* Irish teachers, stating that they feel remorse for those teachers when they hear that Irish is “taught badly”. The user describes that their teachers taught for the exam, though it’s not clear which exam this refers to, and that there was still a lot of learning things by heart (i.e. memorization). However, they don't seem to take issue with this aspect, saying “who can blame them” for teaching this way, insinuating that Irish teachers have to teach students in a way that ensures they pass their exams.

(3C) Just personal experience but I always found Irish taught very well. We had a superb Irish teacher (in fact the entire department was brilliant), with a focus on immersion, from day one our teacher interacted with us in Irish and encouraged us to reply (when we could). The classes were really enjoyable. [...]

I think it reflects the importance of good, interactive teaching and approaching language differently from other subjects. Languages can't be treated as 'just another curriculum obligation', they require more, they need so much more interaction and buy-in from students and teachers. [...]

This narrative was mirrored by the commenter from data sample 3C, who recalls enjoying their Irish classes and states that it was taught well in their school. This person mentions they had great teachers who focused on immersion and speaking Irish in class. In the latter half of the comment, the commenter emphasizes the importance of “good, interactive teaching” that goes beyond curriculum obligations to get students interested. Going back to section 1.2 regarding bad Irish teachers, specifically in data sample 1G, this belief about Irish language teaching is corroborated by others who felt the curriculum generally limits teachers and their teaching abilities.

V. Discussion

A. The Mismatches of Policy Aims and Practice

Ultimately, analysis of the selected Reddit posts from r/ireland revealed a divergence between the aims of the Irish government's language policies and the experiences and aspirations of Irish individuals. The main goal of *The 20 Year Strategy* was to increase daily speakers of Irish, but the findings of this study indicate that there are many factors that obstruct this goal from being accomplished. A dominant feeling among contributors was dissatisfaction with the education system which prioritizes literacy over oral communication skills. If the number of daily fluent speakers of Irish is to increase, "the most effective teaching methods involve oral immersion, where language is learned by hearing and speaking, not through reading" (Hinton, 2003). Creating new and fluent Irish speakers will prove to be difficult unless students are given a solid foundation in conversational skills and speaking practice in the classroom, which is why many revitalization efforts specifically aim to promote "conversational fluency" in youth (Hinton, 2003).

This kind of teaching method can be observed in the success of the language nests pioneered by the Maori people of New Zealand, which are early childhood programs where children are immersed in the language, acquiring it naturally through interaction (Underriner et al., 2021). These kinds of bootstrap methods move away from formal study of the language and toward immersive, community-centered initiatives, which in turn facilitate transmission of the language from one generation to another. Fishman's RLS frameworks emphasize the importance of language revitalization within the language in

the home as a key method to effectively produce new speakers and facilitate this intergenerational transmission. Education alone is not enough to save a language, rather there must be coordination between home, school, and community environments to use and speak the language. For a language to successfully be revitalized, people must be capable of using it, have the opportunity to speak it in both private and public lives, and most importantly, they must have the desire to use it. (Dołowy-Rybińska & Hornsby, 2021)

Similar to findings of Newhall (2024), quite a few commenters also reported having a lack of motivation to learn Irish, viewing it more as a required school subject rather than a valuable cultural asset. Research has shown that motivation is deeply intertwined with learners' success and their attitudes toward the target language community and learning environment (Gardner, 2014). Moreover, when a learner's motivation is driven mainly by instrumental goals, such as graduating school or passing an exam, the learner's interest and commitment to the language often diminishes when the goal is completed (Oroujlou and Vahedi, 2011). If students don't see Irish as a useful tool for active communication, they likely won't remember what they learned in class.

Finally, the positive mentions of good teachers on r/ireland reflect the vital importance of the language teachers' role in the classroom. Gholami and Tirri (2012) argue that both academic care (supporting the student's learning) and personal care (supporting the student as an individual) are essential for nurturing a student's growth. Teachers being supportive and kind instead of mean or strict is impactful on learner success, motivation, and positive attitudes towards the language. These positive attitudes are necessary if the revitalization processes are to succeed.

B. Potential Future Developments

To rectify the shortcomings of the current Irish language policy, the government of Ireland should address this disconnect, and listen to the voices of Irish citizens. Many users across the forums suggested changing the curriculum to being more focused on speaking practice, especially in secondary schools, and less so on literature. A handful of commenters expressed the connection between Irish language and identity, saying that it is important to teach students about the cultural significance of learning Irish. Commenters also suggested that immersion is the most effective method to teach Irish to the new generation, and that Irish-medium education and immersion programs should be in higher attendance. Additionally, increasing the availability of adult classes for parents would be effective in fostering spoken communication among households.

Current and future language revitalization projects could benefit from these findings in that, despite the fact that Irish is governmentally supported and funded, Ireland's efforts to revive the language on a large scale have still not been effective, nor have they been received well by the majority of these Reddit users. Even though Ireland set out a plan for Irish, speaker numbers haven't changed a lot since *The 20 Year Strategy* was published. Ireland is in a unique situation in that a large majority of existing language revitalization projects do not have the governmental support and funding to revive their languages, often leaving the task of language revival up to individual communities. Perhaps the government of Ireland could explore new avenues of language pedagogy utilized by other language revitalization projects in the future.

VI. Conclusion

The present study highlights a significant disconnect between the aims of Irish language revitalization policies and the lived experiences and beliefs of Irish residents. Results underscored a general sentiment of dissatisfaction among this pool of Reddit users regarding their time in Irish language classes. Across all three forums, users continuously pointed to systemic and curriculum-related issues within the education system as being what hinders students' learning. Separately, others pointed towards external societal factors outside of the education system that impede students' acquisition and retention of Irish, particularly the imbalance between learning of Irish in school and at home among families. In the minority were those that reported enjoying their experience of learning Irish in school, which were often shaped by their inspiring Irish language educators. These findings suggest that current pedagogical approaches to Irish language teaching are falling short of helping meet the goals of the 20 Year Strategy in producing new Irish speakers. For the current and future Irish language policies to succeed in increasing the number of overall Irish speakers, the government of Ireland must address this disconnect between policy and practice.

VII. Bibliography

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