

THE RENAISSANCE OF GAELIC

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Spoken Gaelic

What is generally known as Gaelic is usually referred to in Ireland as the 'Irish language' or 'Irish'. The word Gaelic comes from the Celtic Gaedhilde or Gaeilge, which in turn derives from Gaedhil or Gael, meaning 'Irishman'.

Irish Gaelic is closely related to Scots Gaelic and Manx (the now extinct language of the Isle of Man), and more loosely related to Welsh, Breton and the now extinct Cornish language. The first group represents what remains of old Gaelic, a language spoken throughout Ireland, and which spread to Scotland and the Isle of Man. The second group represents the old British Celtic language, which was spoken in the area known today as England and Wales, and which retreated before the invading Anglo-Saxons from the continent, surviving only in Wales, Cornwall, and Cumbria and parts of Brittany (northern France). These two Celtic language groups are mutually unintelligible although quite a number of words are similar.

The modern Irish word for Welshman is 'Breatnach' (British), while the word for Englishman is 'Sasanach' (Saxon). It also happens to be the term commonly used in Scotland to denote an Englishman, although the term is somewhat derogatory. It is interesting to note that 'Wales' is not a Celtic but rather a Germanic word referring to 'foreigners'. It is related both to the French form Wallon and the German form Welsch (e.g. 'welschen' or 'Kauderwelsch' = fremdländisch). For Wales, modern German uses 'Wales', 'Waliser' (noun) and 'walisisch' (adjective), not to be confused with the Swiss-German forms 'Wallis', 'Walliser' (both noun and adjective) and 'walliserisch' for the triad Valais - Valaisan - valaisan. The Celtic word for Wales is Gall, which is the form adopted by French speakers, as in Pays de Galles - Gallois - gallois.

The Irish Language Today

Ireland is divided into two language areas: the Gaeltacht or Irish-speaking area, now made up of several Irish-speaking patches and the Galltacht or English-speaking area. Although the Gaeltacht made up the majority of the country until as recently as the mid-nineteenth century, it declined dramatically until the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922. The reasons for this development were mainly socio-economic and political. Since 1922, successive Irish governments have attempted to reinstate the language, offering financial incentives to regions in which Irish is still spoken. There is a special Ministry for Gaeltacht affairs, and the language is a compulsory subject in schools throughout Ireland for pupils of all ages. However, translation from Irish to English or English to Irish is not on the curriculum, since both are taught as native languages. More importantly, the constitution stipulates that Irish is the first language of the country, while English is recognised as a second official language. All legislation is published in both Irish and English, and in cases of ambiguity or conflict, the Irish text is deemed to be binding. Irish language tests are a prerequisite for Civil Service employment.

This policy on the part of the Irish Government has stemmed any further erosion of the language, and today some 10% of the population claims to be fluent in Gaelic. Recently, the language has been experiencing something of a renaissance, particularly among the younger

generation, which has shown a renewed interest in Celtic culture and music – a trend that has received encouragement and support from abroad. A new Irish language television station, Telifis na Gaeilge, has enjoyed surprisingly high ratings. There is also an important political aspect to the language at home, and even abroad, possibly reflecting a desire not to be absorbed into the melting pot of the English-speaking world.

Gaelic has a special status in the European Union. Although it is not one of the working languages, official versions of the major treaties had to be prepared in Gaelic before they would be approved by Dublin. Gaelic also appears alongside the eleven official EU languages on certain documents - the EU model Driving Licence (ceadúnas tiomána), and a few passports (Poblacht na Fraince = République Française).

Gaelic is often used by Irish politicians, although usage is typically restricted to formal oratory, such as greetings and thanks. Most MPs consider it politically correct to include at least a few Gaelic words in their public utterances (cúpla focal = a few words in Irish). This practice might well be copied by Irish MEPs, following the example set recently by Mr. Pat Cox upon his election as President of the European Parliament (Uachtarán Pharlaimint na h-Eorpa), when he pronounced a part of his acceptance speech in Gaelic.

The Language Itself

Gaelic comes from the Celtic branch of Indo-European languages and as such has virtually nothing in common with English, although recently a significant number of words have been borrowed from English in fields such as computers and technology. It is highly inflected. Nouns are declined. There are five cases in both the singular and plural. Initial consonants mutate according to the case and position of the word in a sentence, so that words are often unrecognisable from the original form. e.g. the initial B is sometimes pronounced V (in similar fashion to Spanish). Verbs are quite intricate with complicated declensions and principal and dependant forms. There is no direct translation for the verb “to be”, nor is there anything resembling the verb “to have”. Moreover, although the written language is standardized, there are wide dialectal differences within the Gaeltacht area.

Despite the progress, it is unlikely that anything more than the more commonplace Gaelic greetings, and a handful of other common words and idioms, will appear on the international scene, and these can be learned quite easily – although the help of a Gaelic speaker would not go amiss for the pronunciation!

Common Terms and Phrases

GO RAIBH MAITH AGAIBH = Thank you (**gura moH aguiv**)

SLÁINTE AGUS SAOL = Health and long life (**slawncha agus sale**)

SLÁINTE for short = To your health, Cheers, when having a drink
(**slawncha**)

SLÁN AGUS BEANNACHT = All the best, Take good care, literally
SAFETY AND BLESSING (**slawn agus bannocht**)

SLÁN for short = Good bye (**slawn**)

GO N-EIRÍ AN BÓTHAR LEAT = Good luck, literally “may the
road rise with you” (**gu nighree an bohar lat**)

GO MBEANNAÍ DIA DHAOIBH = God bless you, used for
Good morning/afternoon/evening (**gumanny jia ghueev**)

BEANNACHT DÉ AR AN OBAIR = God's blessing on the work

(bannocht jay air on ubar)

GO NDÉANA DIA TRÓCAIRE AIR/AICI = May the Lord have mercy

upon him/her **(gu nyayna jia trocara air/ecke)**

CÉAD MÍLE FÁILTE = Welcome, literally "a hundred thousand

Welcomes" **(kayd meela fawltya)**

A DHAOINE UAISLE = Ladies and Gentlemen **(a ghueene ooishla)**

A CHARA DHÍLIS = Dear Friend **(a chara yeelish)**

A CHÁIRDE = Dear Friends **(a chawrdia)**

UACHTARÁIN = President **(uachtarawn)**

UACHTARÁIN NA H-ÉIREANN = President of the Republic of Ireland

A UACHTARÁIN PHARLAIMINT NA H-EORPA = Mr President of

the European Parliament **(a uachtarawn farlamint na hyorpa)**

CATHAOIRLEACH = Chairperson **(caheerloch)**

ÁRAS AN UACHTARÁIN = Residence of the President of the RI

(in Phoenix Park), literally "the President's house".

TAOISEACH = Prime Minister

DEPARTMENT OF THE TAOISEACH = Prime Minister's Office, also referred to as 'Buildings' (the seat of the PM's Office)

TÁNAISTE = Deputy Prime Minister

AN ROINN = Department (= Government Ministry)

BÓRD FÁILTE = Irish Tourist Board

BÓRD SLÁINTE = Health Board

BÓRD NA GAELGE = Irish Language Board

OIREACHTAS = Parliament (Ireland has a bicameral system)

DÁIL ÉIREANN = Lower House of Parliament, commonly referred to by the Irish as 'Parliament' **(doyle erin)**

CEANN CÓMHAIRLE = Speaker of the Parliament

T.D.s = Members of Parliament

SEANAD ÉIREANN = Upper House of Parliament, Senate

Main political parties:

FIANNA FÁIL = ruling Republican Party, the largest, literally

"soldiers of destiny" **(fecaanna fawl)**, in coalition with the PDs

PD Progressive Democrats = right of centre, small party, in coalition with Fianna Fáil

FINNE GAEL = centrist, second largest, Christian-Democrat party, currently in opposition **(fina gwayl)**

SINN FÉIN = left-wing, Republican Socialist Party, the only all-Ireland political entity **(shin fayn)**

Labour Party

Green Party

For those interested in the subject, a fair amount of information is available in print and on the Internet. For beginners, there are several free language learning resources, often including audio material.

Websites:

<http://homepage.tinet.ie/~dblack/cybereirinn/asbearla.htm>. A homepage offering a complete directory of Internet resources for Irish, including links to course sites, dictionaries, and even a translation service.

www.historyoftheworld.com/irecounty/lang.htm

www.maths.tcd.ie/gaeilge/gaelic.html. An Irish language course with audio material from Trinity College Dublin.

www.rte.ie The Irish National Broadcasting service, which provides live radio broadcasts in Irish, as well as video recordings of An Nuacht, the televised news bulletins.

The author was born in Dublin. He holds a law degree from Trinity College Dublin and learned Irish as a second language. He is also fluent in French and German. An enthusiastic traveller, he is conversant in Welsh, Italian, Modern Greek and Arabic. He is currently working in Paris as a teacher of English and translator. E-mail billykeily@hotmail.com