

University of Florence
Reading and Writing Lab. 2017/2018

Preserving Celtic languages

Name student 1

Name student 2

Name student 3

Name student 4

Prof. K. McLachlan

Table of Contents

Introduction3

Description4

History.....6

Decline and why9

Preservation.....11

Conclusion.....12

References.....13

Introduction

Every day more and more languages become endangered or extinct: according to UNESCO, it is estimated that one language dies out every fourteen days. Ewa Czaykowska-Higgins, a professor in linguistics at the University of Victoria, claims that languages define cultures and peoples, and that every time one dies, it is an immense loss: “Languages hold a world of knowledge. We lose knowledge and history and lose connection to a land [when a language is lost].” While it is true that several hundreds of languages have died in the past decades, communities all around the world are trying to revitalize them, and preserve those on the brink. This essay will focus in particular on the family of Celtic languages, the history, what caused and is causing their decline, and will give solutions that would allow their survival and revitalization.

Description

“Q” Celtic and “P” Celtic

The Celtic languages are a branch of the Indo-European family and they fall into two groups: the Continental Celtic and the Insular Celtic. The first one includes the languages Gaulish, Celtiberian, and Leponti, languages spoken in the area from Gaul to Iberia in the south and Galatia in the east, for which, as of now, there are no living native speakers. But there is a huge amount of inscriptions found in the area of Gaul and in the north of Italy that help scholars to study the languages and maybe in the future to rebuild them. The second one is a still living language, spoken in the area of British isle, Brittany and France, and it is divided by scholar into two groups (Schmidt 1988), Goidelic and Brythonic. Goidelic, known as "Q Celtic", because the speakers use a "Q" sound, usually represented by a C or K. For instance, in Irish and Scottish Gaelic the word head is “ceann”, or sometimes “kin”.

The history of Goidelic date from the third century, when some Celtic migrating groups settled in Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man and the language has all evolved in their own way. Now, Goidelic includes the existed languages Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Manx. Irish is mainly spoken in Gaeltacht areas. According to "The Irish language" (2016) the total amount of people who are able to speak Irish is around 1.76 million, among them only around 32 % speak Irish outside of education system. Scottish Gaelic is spoken along the northwest coast of Scotland, and in the Hebrides islands. It is also spoken Canada, particularly in the Nova Scotia region, in the north regions of America, New Zealand, and Australia, due to the wave of emigration during the period between 18th century and 19th century. The language was introduced into Scotland about 500 AD, in the 16th century the first book written in Scottish Gaelic "Foirm na Nurnuidheadh" was published in Edinburgh in 1567 by John Carswell. Then the two followed centuries the language

had been spoken widely in Scotland, until the English language gained popularity, and the impact of Scottish Gaelic has been lost and the rate of people who spoke it decreased dramatically. The current number of Scottish Gaelic speakers is around 60.000. Manx is a language at a high risk of extinction. It is spoken only in the island of Man. Although the last native Manx speaker, Ned Maddrell, died in 1974, the language is still spoken as the second language by non-native people in order to maintain the language's culture and the island's heritage.

Brythonic, called also as "P Celtic", because while in "Q Celtic" people use the sound of c or k, in "P Celtic" the sound P is frequently used. Welsh, Breton and Cornish are languages belong to Brythonic. Welsh is natively spoken in Wales, with 582,000 people can speak it according to the survey "Welsh language use " in 2013, in England, but with few people, and in V Wladfa, the Welsh colony in Chubut Province, Argentina. It is not clear when Welsh bacame distinct, but some scholar, Janet Davies in her book "the Welsh Language: a History", thought that it originated from the Britons at the end of the 6th century. However, after 7th century many of inscription have been found. Compared to the other numbers of family, Breton has a huge number of speakers, with 532,000 native speakers and 1.2 million of second language users, maybe linked to the wide spoken district. Brittany region, Finistere, western Cotes d'armor, and western Morbihan departments are home of Breton. Cornish is a revived language that became extinct as the first language in the end of the 18th century. Considering the importance of the language for Cornish culture, in the 20th century the revival actions have been proposed and carried out. Now it has around 500 the second language speakers. Furthermore, they are trying to create the native speakers, teaching their own children Cornish when they are born.

History

An expedition through the history of every languages

To truly grasp the reason why a group of languages died, or became endangered, one must necessarily know how they came to be. The history of the Irish language began around twenty-five hundred years ago, but it was with the Christian era that native Irish speakers have spread to their highest point, conquering the actual territory of Ireland, the Isle of Man, and the west coast of Britain and Scotland. Its supremacy endured until the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in the 11th century, which brought the Gaelic society into a period of multilingualism, but Irish remained the dominant language nonetheless. This period was called Middle-Irish. During the Classic Modern Irish (1200-1600 AD) period, instead of being considered as an ordinary speech, Gaelic was mostly seen as a language developed in clerical school and was used majorly by scholars and poets, on account of the fact that English was convenient for administrative and legal affairs. In other words, Irish never became a bureaucratic language and its status reached its lowest point during the 17th and 18th century with the battle of Kinsale (1601 AD) and the battle of Boyne (1690 AD), which led the Irish community to both convert to Anglicized way of life and to take up English as main language. Furthermore, the Irish language was almost to the point of extinction with the Great Famine in 1825 AD, which caused the death of almost two million Irish native speakers.

The first Irish Gaels, or Scotti as Latins referred to the inhabitants of Ireland, crossed the strait of Moyle around the 500 AD, and settled in Argyll, or Dal Riàta as they called it. Later on, thanks to the Christianisation work of St. Columba from Ulster in the 6th century and thanks to the consolidation of the kingdom of Dal Riàta the Gaelic tongue became mainly the language of the cleric and churchmen. Since the arrival of the Vikings around the northern and western coast, the Gaels tried to solidify their reign from west to east, including inside their community the tribal confederation called Picts, thanks to McAlpin which also became the first ruler of actual Scotland. In the meantime, hybrid communities started to spring up, like the Ghall-Ghàdhill ("Scandinavian-

Gaelic speakers") as they were called and began to colonize the south-west of Scotland and by the 13th century most of their territory were populated by Gaelic speakers due to an increase usage of Gaelic inside the elite community (Crann). The Scottish Gaelic culture expanded throughout the country and slowly but efficiently became the language of both the elite and common people. However from the 15th century Gaelic as a national speech started to decline due to three main reasons: first, as a result of the division between Highlands and Lowlands and the emergence of Inglis as the language of the royal court. The "Act of Union" in 1707 accelerated even more the use of English. Ultimately, the "Education Act" (19th century) imposed the English as the sole medium of teaching in schools.

The Isle of Man, also known as Mann, has seen its first inhabitants in the Mesolithic period but it was not until the 5th century that the first Irish conquerors reached its coasts. Afterward, during the 8th century, the Vikings established their community in the island, and the ruled until the battle of Ronaldsway (1275 AD) which conceded the supremacy over the territory to the Scotti. During the 13th and 14th century the sovereignty over the island bounced back and forth between the English and Scotland domain, and it was only after the battle of Nevillecross in 1346 that the English crown finally granted to one of its feudal lordship, Sir John Stanley. The lordship passed to the duke of Antholl in 1736, but the island became the major centre of illegal trades, and in order to not lose valuable custom revenues the British Parliament acquired the sovereignty over the island in 1736, and the remaining prerogatives in on the island in 1828 (Price 1992, Ager 2009).

During the Middle Ages, British dialects began to fragment. The English linguist K.H. Jackson suggested that around the 550 AD the Welsh became distinct from the others thanks to a complete formation of the syllabic structure and sound patterns. With the arrival of the Saxons, the Brittonic language moved to the western fringes of Wales and Cornwall, leaving only a few words and toponyms in England and Scotland such as "corgi" and "penguin". In 1536 the Act of Union of England and Wales specified that English would be the official language in the courts, and non-

English speakers were barred from public office and the Welsh gentry became increasingly English-speaking. In 1588, however, Welsh became the first non-state language in Europe to have its own translation of the Bible thanks to the work of William Morgan, which had a strong stabilizing effect on the language and contributed to its survival. During the 19th century, with the "Welsh not" policy Welsh was banned from schools and pupils using the dialect were stigmatised. By 1901 the number of Welsh speakers in Wales had declined to around 50% of the population and the decline continued throughout most of the 20th century.

The history of the Cornish language began with the abandonment of Britain by the Roman forces in the 5th century, which resulted in the arrival of groups of German tribes from the continent that pushed and confined in the west of Gloucester most of the Britons, an area situated in the actual region of Wales, Cornwall and Cumbria. The Anglo-Saxon dominance lasted three hundred years, until the Normans arrived replacing the Saxon ruling class. However, this situation endured only for three centuries and once again a new English elite started to rule and continued their linguistic and political domain in Cornwall. From 1485, with the ascent to the throne of the Tudors there has been numerous conflicts between the Cornish and the new dynasty: in 1497, 2,000 native speakers were massacred and 13,000 enslaved in a revolution triggered by taxes increase (Ferdinand 2013). Moreover, after the dismission of the Roman Church and the creation of the Church of England, many monasteries and Catholic symbols were destroyed, causing the population to revolt and be annihilated for the second time in just fifty years. Ten years later, in 1559, with the "Act of Uniformity", which denied the translation of "The Book of Common Prayer" and "The Bible", the Cornish became the almost-unwritten language of the lower class of west-Cornwall.

Before the arrival of the Romans, Celtic-speaking tribes were already allocated in the region, but with the migration of Celtic-speaking people in the 5th century from the southern Britain and from Wales the Brittany/Armorica was divided in two -this is probably the reason behind the similarity between Breton, Cornish and Welsh- such as Gallo-Frankish Armorica in the east and Breton

Armorican in the west. In the 9th century with Nominoë, a Breton loyal to Louis the Pious, Brittany became a loyal duchy of the Frankish crown, until when the one hundred years' war occurred and afterward its fidelity shifted back and forth in order to be less dependent on France. Later on, when the French revolution started the Breton language proceeded towards a down-ward trend, in fact by trying to "turn everyone in a citizen fully educated" the Breton was not contemplated since children needed to learn to speak, and write in French language. Moreover, in the last years of the French revolution due to the continuous Breton insurrection no more official documents were written in Breton, while in the mid 19th century the French education committee voted for the ban of Breton from their schools, signing the complete decline of the Brittonic language (Mendel 2004).

Decline and Why

Reasons of the decay

This linguistic family has been slowly declining for centuries. Today, there are approximately 1.3 million speakers of these languages but the number is decreasing with each passing day. Currently, Welsh is the most widely spoken Celtic language. It has about 500.000 speakers but the majority of them mostly speak English (Karl 2011).

Irish is spoken by about 138.000 people as a first language and by 1.000.000 people as a second language in Ireland (Thompson 2016). According to UNESCO, Breton is considered a seriously endangered language, since it has suffered a decrease of about 1 million speakers in the 1950 and a declining of about 200.000 since the first decade of the XXI century.

Moreover, according to the 2011 census, Scottish Gaelic has approximately 7000 speakers. On the other hand, the last native speaker of Cornish has died in the late XIII century, but there is a number of people in Cornwall who have attempted to learn it and even rejuvenate it (Ellis, pp. 115-116). In addition, Manx is considered an extremely endangered language because the last native

speaker has died in the XX century, even if the community is trying to maintain the heritage teaching it in schools and speaking it at home, and using it in official frameworks. As it is explained, these languages are seriously in danger. This paragraph will analyse two important reasons why Celtic languages are becoming extinct.

The disunity of Celtic people during the middle ages contributed to the decline of these languages. According to Karl, each group of these languages had their kingdom but they were constantly fighting one another, making the survival of their own culture hard to maintain. Consequently, the unified Anglo-Saxons were able to expand their dominance. This lack of unity has contributed to the decline of these languages. Karl continues by declaring that another consequence of this disunity was a loss of status of the Celtic languages in favour of the languages of their conquerors, English in particular. This began in the Middle Ages when the Celtic, defeated by Anglo-Saxons, learned the language of their conquerors rather than keeping their own. Consequently, English became the language of the government and it was used by the higher classes. Instead, Celtic languages were associated with the countryside, social inferiority and poverty. There is a lack of instruction of Celtic language in schools and universities.

Natalie Karl, in her article published on December 2011, explains that English has become the sole language of the education since the English Education Act of 1870. Consequently, students speaking other languages were punished. Only Welsh was admitted in classrooms but only as a mean of teaching English. Nevertheless, it was intended to die out after the students learned English. In addition, Karl continues mentioning that children who are able to learn a Celtic language at home will often lose it, due to the fact that English is taught at school. In other words, English is the first language that students have to learn because it is, namely, the “lingua franca”, the language used for international communication and between different language speakers.

Although Celtic languages are declining, many word of this linguistic family can be found in English, especially toponyms. For example, Scotland means “Land of Scotti”, Wales “Land of the Wealas”, Cornwall “Land of Corn-Wealas”.

Preservation

Measures adopted to protect the celtophonic culture

There are many ways of preserving endangered Celtic languages. While it is true that some people might think of preservation as a waste of time and resources, given that no one would speak these languages colloquially nowadays, it is unquestionable that only through them one can connect with past cultures and societies, not to mention the extensive library of religious books, poetry and epic written using Celtic languages.

The Scottish Parliament, for example, recognised the importance of preserving Scottish Gaelic, and, in 2005, enacted the Gaelic Language Act, promoting the study of it nationwide. The fight to save Scottish Gaelic, however, isn't only taking place within Scotland's borders. A significant amount of immigrants lives in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, and they are also fighting to save their Gaelic heritage, thanks to the creation of the Gaelic Council of Nova Scotia that allows the Gaelic language and culture to factor in their everyday community life.

Even Irish, the most well-preserved of the Celtic languages, finds itself in a dire state. Which is why Cuan Ó Seireadáin created Conradh na Gaeilge, a non-profit organization that works to promote the Irish language both in the country and abroad and to reinstate it as Ireland's primary language. It is worth mentioning that Irish language learning is compulsory in Ireland, but many people left school without being able to actually communicate using it. Aoife Crawford, the acting Irish language officer at Trinity College in Dublin, affirms that the education system was successful when it came to impress in people the idea that they should be fluent in Irish, but couldn't actually make students fluent. There is much hope for the younger generations though, since Irish is very popular among young people, and watching cartoons and listening to pop hits translated in Irish is not at all unusual. With globalization, many people may wonder why is it worth to save them, when it is possible to communicate and work knowing only the "lingua franca".

It is worth to save endangered languages because when we lose one, we lose the culture,

worldview and knowledge of people who spoke it, and it is undoubtedly a loss for all humanity. The knowledge about the local environment is lost, and so are philosophical and religious beliefs, along with music, visual art and poetry. When people have access to learn endangered languages, they have a better chance of becoming citizens of the world, avoiding to make it a bland place with no diversity.

Conclusion

To sum up, Celtic languages are a branch of the Indo-European family, they are divided into Continental and Insular Celtic. As it is explained before the decline of these languages began in The Middle Age when the various Celtic communities were overwhelmed by Anglo-Saxons which imposed English as the official language. Nowadays this phenomenon is still continuing to afflict Celtic languages. However, some measures have been taken to promote the teaching of these languages but, the results did not achieve the established aims.

In conclusion, it is fundamental to save these endangered languages to preserve their culture.

References:

- Aulakh, R. (2013). Dying languages: scientists fret as one disappears every 14 days. Retrieved from https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/04/15/dying_languages_scientists_fret_as_one_disappears_every_14_days.html
- Ó Riain, P. (1992). Early Irish Literature, in *The Celtic Connection* (pp. 65-80).
- Ager, S. (2009). A study of language death and revival with a particular focus on Manx Gaelic. Retrieved from <https://omniglot.com/pdfs/language revival.pdf>
- Ferdinand, S. (2013). A Brief History of the Cornish Language, its Revival and its Current Status. Retrieved from https://www4.uwm.edu/celtic/ekeltoi/volumes/vol2/2_6/ferdinand_2_6.pdf
- Mendel, K. (2004). Regional Languages in France: The Case of Breton. Retrieved from http://vanhise.lss.wisc.edu/ling/files/ling_old_web/lso/wpl/4.1/LSOWP4.1-09-Mendel.pdf
- Background on the Irish Language. Retrieved from <http://www.udaras.ie/en/an-ghaeilge-an-ghaeltacht/stair-na-gaeilge/>
- The Gaelic Language. Retrieved from <https://cranntara.scot/gaelic.htm>
- Pereltsvaia, A., Karl, N. (2011). The Decline of the Celtic Languages. Retrieved from <https://www.languagesoftheworld.info/student-papers/the-decline-of-the-celtic-languages.html>
- Thompson, I. (2016). Irish Gaelic. Retrieved from <http://aboutworldlanguages.com/Irish-Gaelic>
- Berresford Ellis, P. (1974). The Cornish language and its literature. (pp. 115-116).
- Niehues, J. (2006). The Influences of the Celtic Languages on Present-Day English. Retrieved from <https://www.grin.com/document/117895>
- Hoffman, A. (2015). To Have Irish. Retrieved from <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/have-irish>
- Bishop, M. (2014). Celtic Languages. Retrieved from <https://www.studentlanguagepreservation.org/celtic-languages.html>
- Hoffman, A. (2014). Saving Irish. Retrieved from <https://www.kent.edu/magazine/news/saving-irish>
- (2010). Taking action to save Scotland's Gaelic Language. Retrieved from <https://www.alsintl.com/blog/gaelic-language/>
- (2010). How to save Dying Languages. Retrieved from <https://www.alsintl.com/blog/dying-languages/>
- Zimmerman, M. (2016). The Importance of Preserving and Promoting Languages: A Liberal Arts Perspective. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-zimmerman/the-importance-of-preserv_b_12088728.html?guccounter=1