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Volume 16

Issue 1 *The construction of otherness in Ireland*, Guest Editor Encarnacion Hidalgo Tenorio

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2016

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### Recommended Citation

Vaughan, Jill (2016) "Landscapes of the Irish Language: Discursive Constructions of Authenticity in the Irish Diaspora," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 4.

doi:10.21427/D7JB0M

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass/vol16/iss1/4>

## Landscapes of the Irish language: Discursive constructions of authenticity in the Irish diaspora

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Vol. 16(1), 2016, 56-76.

### Abstract

Almost 2 million people in the North and South of Ireland identify as Irish speakers and an estimated 70 million around the globe can claim Irish heritage. While Irish ancestry may be distant for many, the Irish language is active in numerous locations in the diaspora, as documented in research profiling communities across the globe (e.g. Callahan, 1994; Garland 2008; Giles 2016; Kallen 1984, 1994; Noone, 2012a; Ó hEadhra, 1998; Ó Conchubhair 2008; Walsh & NíDhúda 2015 *inter alia*) and evidenced by the existence of many cultural and language groups. Census figures indicate that at least 25,000 people currently speak the language in Canada, the United States and Australia alone (Statistics Canada, 2013; United States Census Bureau, 2015; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), yet very few in-depth general accounts of Irish-language use in the diaspora exist. Linguistic practices within Irish communities worldwide vary widely with regard to Irish-language use and language ideologies, with each community subject to distinct concerns, histories and discourses. As such, each has distinct possibilities for creating social and cultural meaning, possibilities that are fundamentally shaped by the socio-cultural and politico-historical contexts within which the Irish language has existed in the last 200 years. This paper investigates how the Irish language is recruited in constructions of cultural authenticity in three sites in the Irish diaspora: Boston, U.S.; Melbourne, Australia; and St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada. Research is based on open-ended qualitative interviews with 41 learners and speakers regarding the Irish language and their own language practices, and in extensive participant observation of cultural and language-related activities in each site. Thematic content analysis of interview data provides the basis for ethnographic descriptions of each site. A Foucauldian understanding of discourse (e.g. Pennycook, 1994; Foucault, 1981, 1972) affords the identification and delineation of predominant discourses within which Irish-language use is implicated as a meaningful social act, and that are enacted or actively resisted within and across communities, as well as key subject positions made available within these discourses. This approach provides the basis for an exploration of (i) the processes of authenticating a cultural practice within discourse; (ii) how such processes shape the changing configurations of who is included and who is excluded within dominant politico-cultural discourses; and (iii) the various formations of community that exist within and across the diaspora space. The paper shows that the role of the Irish language in authenticating Irish cultural identity is subject to reworkings across time and space, as exemplified in the variety of local meanings it has taken on across the three diaspora sites featured.

**Key words:** Irish language; diaspora; discourse; authenticity

**Introduction: The Irish language in Ireland and the diaspora**

The socio-cultural and politico-historical contexts within which the Irish language has been implicated, particularly in the last two centuries, have shaped the potential for the language, as a cultural practice, to be recruited symbolically in constructing meaning. The language has been positioned during this time most notably within nationalist discourses both within and outside of Ireland as an authentic and traditional cultural practice, and within Republican discourses as a form of symbolic political resistance (see, e.g., Crowley, 2000; Bromage, 1941). However, the conditions characteristic of late/post-modernity (semiotic complexity and uncertainty, disembedded social meanings (Giddens, 1991), the transforming relations of power (Heller, 2006) create possibilities for post-national formations and hybridised identities constructed within, and in opposition to, these established discourses, as well as within emerging discourses around language and language use. The complex, centuries-long, historical developments in the positioning of Irish within political and cultural discourses are articulated in such works as Mac GiollaChríost (2005), Ó Conchubhair (2008), Singleton (2007) and NicPháidín & Ó Cearnaigh (2008), who trace these important semiotic shifts as well as reflecting more post-modern positionings.

Irish is both a minority/minoritised language, i.e. actively 'created by nationalisms which exclude [it]' (Heller, 2006, p. 7), and a language of a minority/ised community in Ireland – in the Republic and in the North. In the Republic, Irish is (decreasingly) spoken as the first language of inhabitants of a number of traditional *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking) communities across the country. What once represented a mutually-intelligible chain of dialects from North to South (McCloskey, 2006, p. 11) is now a group of distinct speaker communities each subject to their own shifting patterns of bilingualism, typically divided into three major varieties (Munster, Ulster and Connacht Irish) (see Giollagáin et al. 2007; Ó Giollagáin & Mac Donnacha 2008; Mac Donnacha & Ó'Giollagáin, 2009; Ó Riagáin, 1992 *inter alia*). The language constitutes a 'retreating discourse' (Lo Bianco, 2009) in many ways in these communities, but also has a strong first and second language speakership in more urban settings, in part among what are referred to as the urban *Gaeltachai* thriving in a number of cities (e.g. Mac GiollaChríost, 2005, 2006/7; NigUidhir, 2006; Zenker, 2013). This speaker community is now significantly larger than the 'traditional' *Gaeltacht*, and indeed challenges established notions about the geographical nature of the *Gaeltacht* (McCloskey, 2006; Ní Bhrádaigh et al., 2007).

Students in the Republic must undertake compulsory Irish-language tuition throughout their schooling, and the language is enshrined to some extent in the Republic's public service and legislation<sup>1</sup>. In Northern Ireland, Irish is available to learn mainly as an L2 in some (mostly Catholic) schools. West Belfast is home to the language's largest urban *Gaeltacht*, which continues to sustain and energise language activism in the North (see, e.g., Pritchard, 1990; 2004; Ó Baoill, 2007; O'Reilly, 1997, 1999; Ó Riagáin, 2007; Willemsma & Mac Póilin 2004 for further discussion of Irish in Northern Ireland).

The language is also to be found in use by networks of speakers and lone learners – and much in between – across the world. As such the Irish-language community is properly understood to be 'a global phenomenon which is no longer restricted to Irish-based and Irish-born' (Ó Conchubhair, 2008, p. 238). Irish-language-based communities pattern

particularly densely around key centres of what can loosely be termed ‘the Irish diaspora’ (i.e., networks of Irish emigrants and their descendants). The configuration of the diaspora, and its prominence in the public consciousness, is a result of significant and prolonged migratory patterns from the seventeenth century until today. The 1990s, however, saw concerted moves on the part of politicians, such as then-President Mary Robinson, and the media to bring to the fore the notion of further including the Irish diaspora within a global imagined Irish community, and of rendering the borders of the Irish ‘ethnoscape’ (Appadurai, 1996) increasingly fluid. The resulting construct incorporated inhabitants of Ireland and the diaspora within a common group, and implicated Irish and diasporic landscapes as belonging to a common terrain.

A small body of work on the use of Irish in the diaspora gives some insight into the various changing roles the language has played for learners and speakers across these diverse communities, and across time. Some fragmented evidence exists regarding patterns of language use among Irish migrants in the nineteenth century, although much of it anecdotal (Kallen, 1994). McGowan (1994), Ridge (1991-2), Nilsen (1996) and Callahan (1994) reveal early use of the language in North America in newspapers, missionary work, among language societies, and in the community more generally (although in some ways ‘underground’ (Callahan 1994) or ‘covert’ (Kallen 1994)), while Corrigan (1992) notes that a significant number of migrants to England in that century would have had no knowledge of English on arrival (although many appear to have largely jettisoned Irish shortly after). NíBhroiméil (2001) tracks the development of the language as a core building block of ethnic identity and distinction among Irish-Americans in the decades towards the end of that century through to the beginning of the next, as a fundamental aspect of a more general ‘Gaelicisation’ project.

Some earlier and more general accounts (e.g. Akenson 1996; Clyne 2003; Fishman 1978; Kloss 1977) have represented the shift from Irish to English in diasporic communities as a rapid and clear-cut choice to use the more ‘pragmatic’ code. As NíGhabhann observes, however, in fact the fate of Irish in the U.S. (and, we might expect, the diaspora more generally) has been overlooked by many scholars. The picture that has emerged from much, largely more recent, work, then, is more nuanced. Nilsen’s (1990) and Stenson’s (1998) studies of native Irish-speaking migrants to the U.S. demonstrate that while intergenerational transmission of the language was often limited to passive knowledge, migrants expressed highly favourable attitudes towards the language and its maintenance, and Stenson’s participants further perceived a more general increase in interest in Irish in the region. McGowan (1994) describes a similar situation for non-native-speaking migrants to the East Coast: limited use but broadly positive evaluations of the language. Interestingly, she notes that some respondents even appeared to have increased their use since migrating.

Work profiling the experiences of new speakers and learners of Irish, both with and without Irish heritage, provides further insights into the complexities of the language’s varying roles in dynamic identity construction processes. A number of recent studies interrogate the backgrounds and motivations of learners attending immersion events in North America. Sullivan (2012) reports that while his respondents tended to legitimise their choice to learn by appealing to Irish ancestry, they also exerted agency and subjectivity in co-constructing/reinventing authentic ‘Irishness’. Giles (2016) finds

similarly that non-Irish learners legitimised their participation by adhering to shared ideologies of authenticity, such as those ascribing an ‘ancient’ quality to the language. He notes also that these learners often identified having a more ‘hobby-like’ interest in Irish. Walsh & Ní Dhúda (2015) and McMonagle (2012) identify a variety of motivations behind the decision to learn Irish as a new speaker in North America, yet both studies highlight ancestry or Irish cultural identity as the most widely attested. On the other hand, Mac Giolla Chainnigh’s (2007) study of an optional credit course in Irish at a Canadian high school revealed no positive correlation between enrolment and ancestry.

Clearly, constructions of authenticity as an Irish learner or speaker have a complex relationship with ethnicity, and are subject to reworkings at local levels. Garland (2008) describes an Irish language classroom context in Southern California where the American teacher and student group repeatedly ascribe authenticity and competence to the sole Irish-born student even though he rejects that authority. These negotiations can thus be quite distinct from those that characterise learner motivations and authenticity constructions within Ireland (see, e.g., O’Rourke & Walsh (2015) for discussion of the competing discourses surrounding new speakers within the Republic of Ireland). Indeed, as McCloskey (2008) speculates, learners outside Ireland are perhaps free of some of the ‘emotional and cultural baggage’ (p. 9) that shape discourses around the language in Ireland itself. In sum, findings in work on the motivations of learners and speakers of Irish in the diaspora<sup>ii</sup> serve to both reinforce and destabilise traditional assumptions about essentialist connections between the language and Irish cultural identity.

Building on this work, this paper proceeds from an assumption that the role of language cannot be adequately understood via a model that uncritically takes language (and other cultural practices) to be a straightforward marker of ethnic allegiance. As the research outlined above demonstrates, relationships with, and meanings of, the language are far more complex, and the language has been engaged with in different ways in different spaces, at different times, by different users. In their recent study of motivations among adult learners of Irish in Dublin, Flynn and Harris (2016) comment that ‘current models and research paradigms still fall short of explaining the full range of affective motivations associated with minority language learning’. While the article fails to acknowledge the significant contributions from much recent work (e.g. O’Rourke & Walsh (2015) on new speakers of Irish, among others discussed above), it does perhaps point to a more general shortcoming within the minority language–learning literature. This current paper therefore situates language practice within discursive formations circulating in a range of community formations where Irish is used in the diaspora. By considering the Irish language and Irish-language use as ‘signifying practices’ (Hall, 1997, p. 2) that may position individuals within dominant discourses, this approach affords a more nuanced understanding of the connection between language, cultural practice and identity. The approach further necessitates an investigation of constructions of authenticity around Irish-language use, and of how old and new constructions shape the changing configurations of who is included and who is excluded within dominant politico-cultural discourses.

### **Methods and Research Sites**

The methods for this study consisted largely of open-ended qualitative interviews with 41 Irish-language learners and speakers<sup>iii</sup>, and extensive participant observation of cultural and language-related activities in three major field sites in the Irish diaspora: Boston, U.S.; Melbourne, Australia; and St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada. Participants were interviewed about a range of topics relating to their own language practices, Irish language, culture and identity<sup>iv</sup>. This work formed part of a PhD research project (Vaughan, 2014<sup>v</sup>) which collected data in these three sites as well as in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, providing a picture of Irish-language use worldwide, and demonstrating how the positioning of a minority language within dominant political and cultural discourses can be recruited in the ongoing construction of speaker identity.

Research having an ethnographic focus is typically concerned with uncovering the locally-salient social categories in some delineated community/ies, by observing the place these categories occupy in local social practices (Eckert, 2005). It is interested particularly in the persons, situated encounters, institutions, networks and communities of practice enshrined in these local processes. The methodological tools of this study (namely interviews and participant observation) enabled such foci by allowing these locally salient categories to emerge both explicitly and implicitly through extensive observed interactions between community members, and between community members and the researcher. Once the data was collated and transcribed, major topics of discourse were identified through thematic content analysis of data using NVivo software for qualitative data analysis. Within this approach, (Foucauldian) discourse is understood to be 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a topic and a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge about a topic' (du Gay, 1996, p. 43, see also Pennycook, 1994; Foucault, 1981, 1972). Practices (such as language use) contribute to positioning individuals as subjects within discourse, and while positioning is constrained by discursive formations, human agency is possible in the often strategic manipulation of available social meanings. By searching within and across all texts from each field site within which a particular discourse is enacted, it was possible to illuminate the delimitations of the discourse (i.e. what is possible to say about the topic), the subject positions associated with it, and the ways in which individuals make meaning by taking up or resisting these subject positions.

This paper presents a small subset of this analysis, considering only the three diaspora sites, and focusing on the implication of the Irish language in the construction of cultural authenticity within the variety of community formations observed in these sites. Each of these research locations is introduced below.

### **Boston**

Data collected between 2009-13 in the U.S. reveals 20,590 people speaking Irish at home, with the highest proportions reported in the states of New York and Massachusetts (United States Census Bureau, 2015)<sup>vi</sup>. The various contributions to Ihde's (1994) compilation of sociolinguistic and historical studies of Irish in the U.S. point to the existence of pockets of speakers maintained in certain major cities (e.g., Boston, New York) due to continued immigration. He notes, however, that the use of the language tends to be characterised by the involvement not of native speakers but of

learners, who have generally not achieved high levels of fluency. As discussed in Section 1, many studies of migrant communities in the U.S. neglect to acknowledge Irish as an extant immigrant language, but there is in fact widespread evidence that the language was and continues to be used in a variety of contexts. Indeed, as in Ireland, the language was strongly mobilised in the late nineteenth century as a symbol of national identity (NíBhroiméil, 2001), and the more politicised language movement developed a distinct identity separate from the language community itself – a separation with ongoing ramifications for the language in the U.S. today.

Massachusetts claims to hold the title of the ‘most Irish’ state in the U.S., with 23% of its inhabitants claiming Irish ancestry (Quinlin, 2004, p. 176). It is a fact readily apparent on the streets of Boston: Irish-related institutions, businesses, monuments, exhibits, pubs and shops abound, and the Irish language is one of a number of forms of cultural expression that is eagerly embraced by those with Irish heritage, and even those without. The city is home to a number of active Irish-language groups, as well as universities with strong Irish-language departments.

In public consciousness, Irish migration to Boston is indelibly tied to the massive influx of (chiefly impoverished, Catholic) migrants during the years of the Irish Famine (1845-52). In reality, though, migrations had already begun prior to the nineteenth century with many Protestants migrating from Ulster. By 1885, children of Irish migrants outnumbered those of Boston’s pre-existing inhabitants (Fallows, 1979), and the neighbourhoods they settled in, such as South Boston and Dorchester, continue to be iconically Irish.

The Irish language has had a continued presence in Boston, certainly since the Famine era, and has enjoyed a resurgence in interest at a number of points in the last century, including in the 1990s as part of a more widespread Irish cultural revival. That decade also saw increased uptake of Irish as a second language, with classes attracting some who had a background in Irish already but many who were completely new to it. Interest has continued steadily since then, nourished by strong programs offered by *Cumannna Gaeilge im Boston* (Boston Irish Language Association), and a number of universities in the area. Word-of-mouth advice also led me to the Greenhills Irish Bakery in Dorchester, south of central Boston, where I found a small haven of native Irish speakers who use the shop as a gathering place to chat in English and Irish. It is highly likely that other similarly fortuitous enclaves exist, connecting different tightly-knit small Irish-speaking communities.

### **Melbourne**

Data from the last two Australian censuses show an increase in Irish-speaker numbers from 918 in 2006 to 1,895 in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012)<sup>vii</sup>. Research on the survival and use of Irish in Australia is scarce, and is largely limited to historical accounts of the language in the nineteenth century (cf. Lonergan 2012, 2004; Noone, 2012a, 2012b; Troy, 1992; Wooding, 2003). It is clear, however, that a large number of early migrants were monolingual speakers of Irish (Jupp, 1988; Lonergan, 2003) and that, given such factors as chain migration and the possibility of practices like code-switching, the language is likely to have survived in some form or another for many years and possibly even generations. Nevertheless, the current status of Irish in

Australia is similar to situations noted in the U.S. (see for example, Callahan, 1994; Kallen, 1994; McGowan, 1994), that is, a large community of language learners who in general will not reach a high level of Irish competence, with small pockets of native speakers likely to exist but vanishingly rare.

Melbourne and Sydney constitute the largest Irish-language communities in Australia, with each city's language school, run under the auspices of the *Cumann Gaeilge na hAstráile* (Australian Irish Language Association), at the epicentre. In Melbourne, these classes are now held at the Celtic Club, an establishment that has endeavoured to cater to the cultural needs of Melbourne's Irish community for over 130 years. Lessons are offered at a number of levels and are consistently well-attended. Native/fluent speakers and newer learners are relatively evenly represented in these classes – a balance maintained by both ongoing migration and ongoing interest in the language.

### **St. John's, Newfoundland**

Newfoundland has a rather different migratory history to the U.S., with most of its Irish population arriving pre-Famine, and many monolingual Irish speakers settling there as a result of the prolonged fishing trade between the two islands. What once was described as 'a diaspora of Irish fishermen' (Kelly, 1969, p. 39) is now a community which has an enduring connection to Irish culture, with strong community memory of the language in the province's capital, St. John's, and the Avalon Peninsula<sup>viii</sup>. Newfoundland is also one of the only places outside of Ireland to have a distinct name in Irish: *Talamh an Éisc* (the Fishing Ground). Most of those who came to fish were from the southeast of Ireland. By the late eighteenth century up to 5000 people were leaving Waterford each year, and most of St. John's inhabitants were Irish, many of them monolingual Irish speakers

[I]t is unlikely that any other province or state in contemporary North America drew such an overwhelming proportion of its immigrants from such localised source areas in the European homeland over so substantial a period of time. (Mannion, 1977, p. 7)

Reports suggest that the language may have been a dominant one until at least the early nineteenth century (Foster, 1982; Howley, 1888) and was certainly still being widely spoken towards the century's end (Byrne, 1988). While the language is no longer spoken as a first language there, many Irish borrowings remain in current Newfoundland English (Ó hEadhra, 1998; Kirwin, 1993) and the rural accent is uncannily similar to that heard in Ireland's southeast.

Community memory of Irish being widely heard in the region is a major factor in the language's current popularity as a second language. A significant proportion of Newfoundland's contemporary population is descended from Irish migrants (Mannion 2001, p. 257)<sup>ix</sup>, and many Newfoundlanders identify strongly with their Irish heritage:

[W]hatever province you go to, it's the Irish pockets that are the most proud about it. And I think we definitely get it from our Irish ancestors. (*St. John's 3*)<sup>x</sup>



I have met people here who will say, ‘oh yeah, I’m from Ireland’ [...] and their family would have emigrated in the 1700s. You know, they have a connection that goes back hundreds of years. (*St John’s 1*)

There is some community knowledge about the language’s history in the region, a ‘sense that the language was here in the past’ (*St. John’s 5*); ‘this is the place that has a lot of the Irish that left 200 years ago and have that kind of fossilised memory’ (*St. John’s 4*). It appears, then, that the language represents an opportunity to forge a strong genealogical link. But the language’s appeal is broader than this in the region; the historical status of Irish on the island has led to its availability as a cultural icon not just of Ireland, but of Newfoundland itself – a crucial point of difference (accurate or not) distinguishing the province from the rest of Canada. As such, there have long been active groups of learners and speakers, especially in St. John’s, and Irish is offered as an elective subject at Memorial University in St. John’s, a feat that has been vital to the language’s ongoing presence in the region.

### **Language and cultural authenticity in the Irish diaspora**

Learning and using the Irish language is experienced by many as a particularly ‘authentic’ way to connect with an Irish heritage. This was especially attested in the diaspora communities surveyed (cf. communities in Northern Ireland and the Republic in Vaughan, 2014). Conferral of ‘authentic’ status, however, is not straightforward; it is fundamentally constituted by predominant discourses and, as such, is subject to change and re-evaluation. Indeed, Bucholtz (2003, p. 408) warns that it is inappropriate for sociolinguists to speak of authenticity at all, but ‘more accurately of authenticity effects, achieved through the authenticating practices of those who use and evaluate language’. In this study, participant commentary from each community, in tandem with a broader investigation into the dominant discourses in circulation, gives an insight into what constitutes perceived cultural authenticity, and how a practice becomes seen as, and remains, authentic.

Cultural identity in the diaspora sites was something that may be handed down from generation to generation, and held onto even when the actual point of migration is quite distant in the past. This was commented on especially by American participants, with anecdotes like the following common in interviews, when recent Irish migrants encountered those who had been in the U.S. for generations:

I always remember when I first came here, you know, I lived up in Pennsylvania one summer when I was 18 and I’d say to people, they’d say ‘oh you’re Irish, I am too!’ and I’d go to say, ‘oh! Where are you from?’ and it took me a while to realise that, you know, this is... that people identify themselves with their cultural heritage. (*Boston 2*)

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given this tendency, a majority of learners in all diaspora communities gave their own heritage as a major factor in learning motivation<sup>xi</sup>, as Irish was felt to be ‘their legacy, and their right, their birthright through their grandparents or parents’ (*Boston 4*):

[I use it] for heritage reasons. (*Melbourne 6*)

It's part of my heritage. (*Boston 20*)

My love of my ancestral heritage and the culture of Ireland in general. (*Boston 24*)

An interest in the language of my ancestors. (*Melbourne 3*)

A lot of people are interested in the language and a lot of people realise that it's an important part of who we were. (*St. John's 6*)

Personal family narratives that include having to give up the language in a family's past can contribute to an inherited sense of loss of the language specifically, as well as of aspects of cultural identity more generally, and provide motivation in a quest to recapture some part of what was lost – to 'grasp culture' (*Boston 23*):

I think out here it is important to people probably because they [...] realised they lost something and then we had the big boom in people learning the Irish language here. (*Boston 4*)

It's probably a sense of identity, it's a recapturing, it's self-discovery, it's a challenge. (*St. John's 4*)

The language in particular, as a cultural artefact, is recognised to be among the more 'authentic' expressions of Irish identity. We can understand this as being a function of a broader positioning of the Irish speaker as the ideal cultural authentic within traditional discourses of ethnicity (this is especially true of the *Gaeltacht* Irish speaker – a prime example of Chamber and Trudgill's (1998) idealised 'NORM' (non-mobile, older, rural male)). But why is the Irish language understood to be more 'authentic' than other cultural practices? Coupland's five qualities of authenticity (2003, pp. 418-419) are useful here in understanding the component aspects of the authenticity construction around Irish, and capture a number of trends to emerge from the data:

*Ontology: authentic things have a real existence, not spurious or derived*

This aspect is especially clear in the opposition created between the Irish language as a cultural practice and more spurious practices, like green beer and wearing 'kelly-green sweatshirts with like big white shamrocks on them' (*Boston 13*), which have no real meaning in Ireland. The language has a 'real' existence in Ireland, and has real meaning for its speaker community.

*Historicity: authentic things have longevity and have survived*

Irish has a long and verifiable lineage, proven by '1500 years of distinguished literature' (*Boston 1*), among other things. It is not 'fabricated to order' (Coupland, 2003, p. 418). As *Melbourne 4* suggests, a language's history shores up its position as a cultural artefact and contributes to its 'uniqueness':

It's very important to have the uniqueness of a language and the history and everything that goes behind where it's come from. (*Melbourne 4*)

*Systemic Coherence: authentic things reflect a principled set of relations*

The Irish language exists as part of a social and cultural matrix, and is sufficiently enshrined in a range of significant contexts. Indeed, in the following extract, this participant questions the validity of cultural practices that are not realised through the language:

The Irish are pretty sure they're Irish and they do Irish cultural things. Irish dancing in North America, Irish music, songs. Participate more or less fully in things associated with the language, but the language is no longer in there. It's like the language has come loose from everything else. That is a different sort of a tragedy, and it's disconcerting – when the language is lost, how meaningful is the other stuff that was expressed though the language. That in some ways is more tragic. (*Boston 1*)

*Consensus: authenticity depends on a process of authorisation invoking some form of authority*

Irish has a speaker community that is enabled to authenticate it, and is subject to processes of standardisation and more general emergence of norms.

*Value: authentic things have cultural value*

Irish is seen by many as the ultimate means for enshrining and experiencing Irish culture, and understanding the 'collective Irish mind' (*Melbourne 6*).

A number of other factors contributing to the perceived authenticity of Irish emerged from the data. Not only was Irish portrayed as a worthy practice due to its inherent cultural lineage, legitimacy and value, but also because it may be deemed more 'elemental' than other aspects of Irish cultural practice. Indeed, especially for fluent speakers, it is not conceptualised as a practice at all, but rather as an innate essential part of being Irish; as *Boston 11* claims, 'it's such a part of you [...] the core of what we are'. For those who are not born into an Irish-speaking family, Irish may also be seen as especially authentic as it is 'earned'. The process of becoming an Irish speaker is understood to be difficult, and it is inaccessible to the casual participator in Irish culture. This notion of casually performing clichéd acts of Irishness in the diaspora is referred to variously in the data, and the literature more generally. S/he may be described as a 'Plastic Paddy' (who appropriates ersatz Irish cultural symbols in an excessive way despite not having been born in Ireland and/or having only distant Irish descent (see, e.g. Arrowsmith, 2004)), as a 'Professional Irish' person ('[Y]ou celebrate Saint Patrick's Day. You claim you're Irish, but that's it. You know nothing about the land, the language, and the culture', as described by respondent 'Peter' in Sullivan (2012, p. 436)), or as a proponent of a 'leprechaun and shamrock image' of Irishness (Callahan, 1994; Kallen, 1994). In discourse, the search types may be opposed to the subject position of the authentic Irish speaker:

[M]y high school was predominantly Irish. Like, it was full of really Irish people, like, I mean in Dorchester, right. The South Shore of Massachusetts is called, like, the Irish Riviera – the Irish Riviera sends their boys to my high school. So, like, a heavy presence of, like, I felt like Plastic Paddy-ness. I sort of wanted to, sort of, like, almost, like, get an understanding of, like, what does

this identity mean, because you throw out, 'I'm Irish', or whatever, what does that mean? So, like, I think almost the language is kind of, like, became a way to authenticate it. (*Boston 13*)

Unlike participating in prescribed forms of 'organised Irishness' (*Boston 13*), learning a language in order to make a cultural connection entails 'probing into something deeper, you're trying to find, and again this might be mumbo jumbo, but you're trying to find out something deeper' (*St. John's 4*).

Contrary to Coupland's (2003, pp. 418-9) definition of the quality of 'historicity', though, in the diaspora particularly, Irish may be viewed as authentic precisely because it has not survived as a community language in that context:

I think that they really value it as like something really culturally important. [...] I think that that's some aspect of like the Irish-American community, there's no...there is an awareness of a language and like maybe some sort of cultural memory of having to give that language up for economic reasons, and so like when you say like, 'well, I'm actually going to like do something like academic with like sort of almost like a reclaiming of...' So saying like, 'oh, I'm doing this at Harvard' for a lot of people means... like that sort of, I think, validates some sort of part of them to be like, 'this is real, this is real'. I've been lucky with that. (*Boston 13*)

The ideal of historicity is still useful here, however, as the desire to connect with the language can reflect an intention to re-establish the historical connection, to establish a continuation in ownership of an authentic practice.

### **Commodification and nostalgia**

Nostalgia and the iconisation of cultural practices are natural by-products of processes of authentication, and are especially so when the 'authentic' is equated with the 'traditional', as has been widely attested in the diaspora data. The authenticity of 'traditional' cultural products is evaluated and re-evaluated constantly: those that are deemed 'authentic' may become subject to nostalgia, as they are typically understood to characterise an idealised past, and may then become subject to 'commodification'. This term is used in its more general sense here, as exemplified in Heller (2003), to refer to the 'reification of a social process' (Johnstone, 2009, p. 161) within the marketplace, rather than its narrower denotation focusing on material artefacts for sale or consumption. In terms of language, this refers to the understanding of language 'as being a marketable commodity on its own, distinct from identity' (Heller, 2003, p. 474). Indeed, ethnocultural/linguistic authenticity itself has increasingly been commodified in certain minority language settings (such as in Heller's example of francophone Canada), 'as opposed to being used as a marker for political struggle' (*ibid*).

Data from all field sites revealed active processes of commodification of authenticity in the form of cultural products; processes that rely on value judgements based in nostalgia for imagined, or even 'fetishised', traditions (i.e. where some practice or product has become limited to largely symbolic meaning and is restricted from developing in a more

natural way (Kelly-Holmes, 1997; 2014)). It is apparent, then, that the Irish language is not alone as a cultural practice in being subject to nostalgia and raised on a pedestal as 'authentic'. A difficulty arises, however, in the maintenance of authentic status for such practices reified within this framework, as commodification and authenticity exist in an uneasy, tense relationship, and constitute sites of struggle. Authenticity within the conditions of the 'market' poses an impossible challenge, as the 'authentic' status here is constructed 'necessarily fictively', i.e. via nostalgia, through linkage to an idealised past (see e.g. Heller, 2002; 2003). As the item is thereby commodified, its authenticity may be undermined and lost as part of the process. 'Over-commodification' of products may then lead to distaste as individuals perceive the lack of authenticity:

[T]his, what they call that 'stage Irishness'. I hate those kind of festivals that sort of call anything, as long as it's... has any jig tune to it or any sort of a... and just call it Irish. It just drives me insane, you know. (*Boston 4*)

They make me sick with the green beer and all that! That gets sickening. (*Boston 9*)

The data indicated that learners and users of the language in all field sites felt Irish had not been subject to over-commodification, unlike some other cultural practices and icons, or at least had not badly suffered from the commodification it has undergone. It was, however, subject to significant nostalgia as a cultural practice, in that it is commonly positioned as representing a connection to an idealised past. Some participants reproduced this positioning, while others commented on it as a widespread misconception. The language was described as enabling a link to 'Old Ireland', and as having mystical resonance for speakers and non-speakers alike. In the extracts below, *Melbourne 1* had long been exposed to Irish having learnt it at school, while *Boston 15* had never heard the language spoken before having the experience described:

[T]here is definitely something very mystical and magical about Ireland in general but also about the Irish language. So, there is something Celtic you know, I suppose it's part of my roots, I suppose it's in my genes you know, whatever or so. (*Melbourne 1*)

So, I'm sitting on the plane I had worked all day and my youngest was kind of anxious and nervous about flying and all that stuff. And I'm sitting there and the flight attendant voice comes over the P.A. system in Irish. I started to cry, and the thought went through my head, 'I'm going home' [...] One of the things I love about Irish, I feel like of all the languages I've learnt, parts of it is like a tunnel to this far past. (*Boston 15*)

This positioning was widely attested in the diaspora field sites, perhaps because the ongoing (geographical, at least) disconnection from the main Irish-language community allows for increased mythicisation of the language. An Irish teacher working in Galway noted that diaspora learners, more than any other, were 'enthralled by [the language], they're mystified by it. They associate all kinds of wonderful things to it, which may be untrue, but they have a huge interest in it' (*Galway 2*). Furthermore, as the extract below reflects, the idea of Irish can become disconnected from, and thus provide solace

from, the realities of modern Ireland, and so enables maintenance of the idealised ‘Old Ireland’:

[F]or people abroad, [the language provides] maybe a kind of escape perhaps in a sense that you’re away from something [...] because you go back to Ireland with the Celtic Tiger – it was almost a culture shock that you really weren’t very sure where you belong. (*St. John’s 4*)

The Irish language may thus be placed on a pedestal as representing an exalted link to this idea of the past, and as a result some experience discomfort when the language changes: ‘I hate to think that they changed the script, you know? And the spelling, whatever. I wish they’d left it alone’ (*Boston 9*). There is a parallel here with certain negative attitudes attested towards the *Béarlachas*<sup>xii</sup> of *Gaeltacht* speakers, and language mixing among Irish speakers more generally. Preservationist narratives that view such varieties as a threat to linguistic authenticity are discussed in Kelly-Holmes (1997) and O’Rourke & Walsh (2015). Within this discourse, speakers with ‘hybridised and hyphenated’ linguistic repertoires can be ‘branded failures’ (Kelly-Holmes, 1997, pp. 167-168), while the idealised *Gaeltacht* native speaker of the past may be reified as truly authentic (O’Rourke & Walsh (2015, pp. 69-70). This discourse exemplifies the tensions that can surround the co-existence of real language use within a natural speaker community on the one hand, with a more commodified, symbolic understanding of what constitutes linguistic authenticity on the other.

### **Community Formations and discourse**

Data from interviews across the research sites point to a shared superordinate imagined ethnic community spanning Ireland and its various diaspora communities. This ‘imagined community’ (i.e. a community of which the members ‘will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (Anderson, 1991, p. 6)), is created and contributed to by the evolving Irish ‘ethnoscape’ (Appadurai, 1996) to which diaspora inhabitants understand themselves and their spaces to belong. The Irish ethnoscape dictates that individuals belong to a common group, akin to the ‘greater Ireland’ that includes the diaspora that Arrowsmith (2004, p. 470) describes (see the quote from *Boston 2* in Section 3), but also implicates landscapes that belong to a common terrain. Thus, ‘[h]omelands are constructed by infusing physical terrain with national meaning, transforming landscape into ‘ethnoscape’’ (Schwartz, 2006, p. 3). Examples of this in the data include the attribution of Irishness to the ‘Catholic’ side of any number of inlets in Newfoundland, and the linguistic landscape of Boston Irish neighbourhoods with their Irish murals and signs:

[T]ypically you get a Newfoundland community which is built around an inlet of the ocean. One side will be English Protestant and one side will be Irish Catholic. (*St. John’s 2*)

[T]here’s sort of different places where you could see Irish murals and, like, almost like reminiscent of Belfast, those kind of murals. (*Boston 13*)

This conception of the Irish ethnoscape allows diaspora spaces to be cast as belonging within the elastic physical borders of the Irish nation:

[T]his is the 33rd county that Ireland forgot about, or that drifted off. (*St John's 1*)

Community is, however, also imagined at numerous other levels which nest within and crosscut the superordinate category. A number of examples indicated a conception of an ethnically Irish community at a relatively local level. This was particularly the case in St. John's, which will be addressed in the following section. An ethnically Irish community may also be imagined as spanning some or all of the diaspora. This is made apparent by the frequency with which the 'Irish diaspora' is placed in opposition to 'Ireland' as the homeland in the interview data, with each subject to differing cultural frameworks and linguistic practices. Community may also be imagined within a nation state in the diaspora, such as here in the grouping of the Melbourne Irish community with other prominent Irish communities in Australia:

I know in Sydney there is [an Irish-speaking community], and in Adelaide there are, but it's a lot of work to keep a diaspora going [...] even in the Melbourne group. (*Melbourne 4*)

### **Language and cultural identity in St. John's**

In some places, Irish cultural identity can take on specialised local meaning, providing motivation that may feel more immediate for learners. An obvious example is in Northern Ireland, where language and culture is so often assumed to be political (see, for example, Ó Riagáin, 2007; Pritchard, 2004; O'Reilly, 1999), but Newfoundland provides another interesting case, in some ways comparable to the Northern Irish situation. The history of migration to the province has resulted in a high proportion of Newfoundlanders with Irish heritage, especially on the Avalon Peninsula, but also in a strong presence of inhabitants with English heritage. Traditionally the two communities have coexisted in clearly delineated spaces. Because the Irish presence in the province is so strong, established expressions of authentic Newfoundland cultural identity overlap to a great extent with Irish cultural identity:

There is such an Irish presence here that the non-Irish Newfoundlanders are sometimes complaining bitterly that the only aspect of the Newfoundland culture that gets pushed is the Irish Newfoundland. (*St. John's 2*)

As such, what was traditionally a local and oppositional identity category has been recast in some contexts as representative of Newfoundland identity as a whole. Therefore, the choice to learn Irish in Newfoundland can be meaningful as an act that contributes towards connecting with Newfoundland identity, with Irish culture merely implicit in what is understood by Newfoundland culture:

If you had looked at the roll [in an Irish class at Memorial University in the 90s], the names – they were all Irish surnames, every last one of them. And many of them had Irish first names as well. And if they didn't have an Irish last name you'd find their mother was Irish or whatever. And I don't mean

Irish out of Ireland, I mean Irish Newfoundlanders. They'd been here for centuries. (*St. John's 2*)

[T]he more that I guess I spent time away from Newfoundland, the more I realised how important it was to me, and I thought that this [learning Irish] would be a good way to help ground me I guess in kind of where my family came from and you know, why we say certain things and why we do certain things. It's so important for me. [...] So I think it's kind of dipping into an identity that was very nearly lost and I think it's an attempt to try to revive it. [...] A lot of people are interested in the [Irish] language and a lot of people realise that it's an important part of who we were if not who we are right now, you know? (*St. John's 6*)

The availability of this symbolic repertoire of Irishness in Newfoundland has become particularly useful in recent decades with the observable shift towards reshaping the image of the Newfoundlander, or rather the stereotypical negative image of the dull-witted, simple-but-happy 'Newfie' (see King & Clarke, 2002), to 'shake off the stigma of being poor or illiterate and just kind of move on' (*St. John's 6*)<sup>xiii</sup>. Characteristic reactions have been to modernise (e.g. 'You had a lot of people studying computer technology' (*St. John's 6*)), but also to turn to historical realities to shore up and legitimate existing identities, and to engage more deeply with known historical cultural connections. For those with Irish ancestry (and others), Irish culture and language provides a prime means of making such a connection. Pavlenko and Norton's (2007) discussion of the ways in which imagined speaker communities may influence 'agency, motivation, investment, and resistance' (p. 669) in language learners is pertinent here. The authors recognise the semiotic potential of the language learning process in individual's self-identity construction: 'the learning of another language, perhaps more than any other educational activity, reflects the desire of learners to expand their range of identities and to reach out to wider worlds' (p. 670). In the case of Newfoundland, learners of Irish are responding to a desire for membership in imagined communities at both local and transnational levels: through participating in language-as-practice, learners 'imagine who they might be, and who their communities might be' (Norton, 2013, p. 4).

In considering these multiple formulations of community around Irish ethnicity and Irish-language practices, it is apparent that the traditional schema of diaspora relations as a simple triangulation of diaspora community–host country–home country (as is relied on in work such as Wonneberger, 2004) is insufficient in capturing the complex and varying dynamics of how Irish-language speakers experience community in the diaspora, and how discourses are likely to circulate and control. Furthermore, the dynamics of emerging online communities further demonstrate that a triadic understanding of diaspora may not capture new kinds of communities of Irish-language practice, as an individual speaker located in the diaspora need not construct their identity within the imagined diaspora space at all. Online spaces have the potential to provide a community that is deterritorialised and not confined to the Irish ethnoscape as it is commonly understood.



## Conclusion

Constructions of cultural authenticity within discourses circulating in the Irish diaspora recruit the Irish language as a practice in a range of ways. This paper has provided an account of some complexities in how the processes of imbuing a practice with discursive meaning, as well as authenticating a practice in discourse, may operate. Traditionally and, in many cases, still dominant discourses of ethnicity and tradition function to exclude or 'Other' certain members of the Irish diasporic community as an inevitable outcome of authentication processes. Community members who engage in what are perceived to be less authentic cultural practices (e.g., lacking in historicity or cultural value) may be recognised as 'Plastic Paddies' or casual participators in clichéd forms of Irishness, while the central positioning of the Irish language within discourses around cultural authenticity can result in those without Irish heritage being excluded as 'legitimate' language users.

The construction of meaning in discourse is continually produced and reconfigured, however, and this is nowhere more evident as in the conferral and maintenance of authenticity. As such, the changing shape of dominant discourses means that the role of the Irish language in authenticating Irish cultural identity is potentially subject to reworkings across time and space (for example the changing local meanings in the contexts of Northern Ireland and Newfoundland). The role of the diaspora space in such reconfigurations is complex, and can exert contradictory forces. On the one hand, within the diaspora space, traditional formations (e.g., around ethnicity) are able to be maintained given an inevitable disconnection from ongoing changes in the homeland (such as the changing role of the *Gaeltacht*, new patterns of immigration shifting speaker demographics). On the other hand, the diaspora space potentially provides a freer context for discourses to evolve away from the political and cultural forces that created them. Of fundamental importance in observing these reconfigurations is an understanding of the nature of community formations within and across the diaspora space. It is only with a clear appreciation built on extensive ethnographic enquiry of how individuals experience community that it is possible to identify the levels at which discourses may be circulating and shaping meaning-making.

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank two anonymous reviewers for their insights and constructive feedback. Support and funding for the project was provided by the Australian Research Council and The University of Melbourne.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Irish is recognised in the Constitution as the first official language of the Republic, official documents are required to be translated into Irish, and public services should be available through the language (although this may not always be the case).

<sup>ii</sup> Of course since the majority of work on the topic features communities in North America, a fuller understanding of the experiences of learners and speakers elsewhere in the diaspora is still required.

<sup>iii</sup> Participants were recruited initially via language classes and university departments (with the snowball technique employed to identify other potential respondents), and so the final group of participants is weighted towards those involved in learning or teaching the language, and in active language maintenance or revitalisation. While this research aims to be as representative as possible of the communities featured, it is a predominantly qualitative study. As such, priority was given to content and depth of data rather than balancing demographics of participants across the sample.

<sup>iv</sup> The broad themes of the information gathered in interviews pertained to participants' Irish-language use, linguistic background, education, motivations in learning/using Irish, perceptions of Irish, (ethnic/cultural) self-categorisation, social networks, use of language media, perceptions of the Gaeltacht and the Irish diaspora, ethno-cultural activities, and hopes/aspirations for the language and their own language use.

<sup>v</sup> <https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/42186>. Thesis available upon email request to the author.

<sup>vi</sup> This census does not elicit language *competence* however.

<sup>vii</sup> In 2011, 10.4% of Australians claimed Irish ancestry

(<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2071.0main+features902012-2013>).

<sup>viii</sup> Census figures are not relied upon here for Irish speakers in the region for a number of reasons. Firstly, the Canadian census singles out only Welsh among the Gaelic languages (i.e. in 2011 there were 1645 speakers of 'Gaelic languages' other than Welsh (Statistics Canada, 2012). Secondly, it targets only 'mother-tongue' speakers, so provides an incomplete picture of broader speaker patterns. And thirdly, the focus on the research in Newfoundland here is on learners, some relative newcomers to the language, and so census figures are not wholly relevant.

<sup>ix</sup> In 2006, 21.5% reported being of Irish 'ethnic origin' (7% listed Irish as their only response, the rest as one of multiple, e.g. alongside Canadian) (Statistics Canada, 2009).

<sup>x</sup> Participants are referred to here by anonymous codes (e.g. *Melbourne 1*) reflecting only the order they were interviewed in within each research site.

<sup>xi</sup> Although this is certainly not the whole picture. Indeed, a number of participants did not have Irish heritage or did not connect it to their learning choice at all. Furthermore, participants attested a range of varied motivations in language use beyond the purely cultural. This corroborates findings in other work on Irish in the diaspora context discussed in Section 1, such as McMonagle (2012), Sullivan (2012) and Walsh & Ní Dhúda (2015).

<sup>xii</sup> The use of Anglicisms when speaking Irish.

<sup>xiii</sup> It is interesting to note that this opposition between the 'Newfie' stereotype and other, more 'authentic' or 'real' notions of the Newfoundlander mirrors in some ways the dichotomy between the 'Plastic Paddy' character and the cultural authentic attested in other parts of the diaspora.

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