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THE INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE GROWTH OF NATIONAL MASS MOVEMENTS AND THE DECLINE OF THE NATIVE LANGUAGE IN 19TH-CENTURY IRELAND

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Abstract: *This paper is part of a longer study (see Pintér 2008) into the history of language policy in Ireland, and is concerned with one of the most complex language-related issues of modern Ireland: In the early 20th century, the nearly extinct native tongue was reconstructed as a powerful symbol and rallying point of national politics. In what follows I aim to explore the origins of this phenomenon and seek to answer two key questions: 1. What interconnections existed between the dramatic decline of Irish and the contemporaneous spread of national mass movements in Ireland in the 19th century? 2. To what extent was the language policy of early 20th-century nationalist Ireland grounded in the linguistic attitudes and behaviour of political movements in the previous century?*

Key words: *Ireland, Irish language, language shift, national mass movements.*

1. Points of relevance

My study has been inspired by the following inadequacies observable in literature on the Irish-English language shift:

1. Although both the Irish language question of the 20th and 21st centuries and the Irish-English language shift have been widely researched, a systematic analysis that covers the period between the Early Middle Ages and the 20th century, and is based on a combined implementation of historical and language political approaches has so far gained limited ground (cf. Crowley 2000).

2. In previous research there has been no consensus as regards the beginning and main stages of the prolonged Irish-English language shift: works have dated the start of the process either to the pre-Tudor Times, or to the Tudor Era; and the timing of irreversibility and of most critical phase has ranged from the 17th, through the 18th to the 19th centuries (see e.g. Corkery 1968, de Fréine 1977, de Fréine 1978, Hyde 1967, Kelly 1999, Ó Huallacháin 1994, Ó Murchú 1988, Wall 1969). This diversity of opinion presumably derives from the fact that the first census including questions on Irish-language use was made in Ireland as late as 1851, and language-related tendencies and phenomena characterizing earlier periods have led researchers to different observations and conclusions.

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2. Initial Hypotheses

The research aims at supporting four initial assumptions:

1**.** A language-political examination will reveal such details of the language shift which remain less pronounced with alternative approaches and will yield new interpretations of the main phases of the prolonged process. Bartha (1999: 197) explains the relevance of the study of language shift from the aspect of language polictics as follows: the dynamics of linguistic contacts, language retention and language shift can be clearly described in terms of the categories of political activity. This belongs to the field of language policy/language planning.

2. An analysis of texts representing cultural and linguistic ideologies in their respective times will result in a reconstruction of the Irish-English language shift as a historically continuous process of language policy, and will make relevant additions to numerical figures.

3. The Irish-English language shift was a prolonged process gradually moving down the social hierarchy, and the gradual restructuring of the linguistic attitudes and of the language political orientations of the native, colonized society has largely contributed to the linguistic transformation of Ireland.

4. A combined application of the above approaches will open up a dimension of the language shift which highlights those changes of linguistic attitude and behaviour that accompany or even precede numerical alterations in language use, and will provide for a new and more adequately grounded identification of the main stages of the language shift.

3. Research Methods

1. The research uses a broad interpretation of language politics. Thus, language politics is seen to comprise two main components: concepts, plans, and ideologies as well as measures implementing them (see Kiss 2002: 247). Both components require the adoption of an approach which also focuses on the activities, behaviour, mentality and attitudes of the community. Accordingly, the analysis extends not only to the policy of the state and its power but also to the role of groups or even of individuals, who maintain various relations with the authority, and the contexts range from political, social, and economic to cultural and religious (see G. Molnár 1998: 1).

2. From among the possible interdisciplinary links of language politics, the study grasps those pointing in the direction of historical research. It identifies certain historical phenomena of the Irish linguistic scene from the perspective of language policy, or presents their language political importance – particularly if they relate to language political developments in contemporary Ireland (see Edwards 1985: 47).

3. The language-political approach is integrated with the theoretical frame of colonial studies. Since the Irish-English language shift coincided with the colonial past of Ireland, and since the two processes were closely interlinked, the study seeks to explore the historical embeddedness of the linguistic change by revealing characteristic features of linguistic colonialism/imperialism (see e.g. Galtung 1980, Gillingham 1987, Loomba 1998, Moane 1994, Phillipson 1992, Tomlinson 1991).

4. The study analyzes texts which reflect cultural and language political tendencies and ideologies characteristic of their respective times, and relies upon these texts as primary sources for a language political description of the history of the Irish-English language shift.

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4. The Findings of the Research

Whereas most published research traces the start of the Irish-English language shift to the eve of the Tudor conquest or to the Tudor Times, my findings date the first language-political signs of the beginning of the process to as early as the late 12th century, that is, to the time of the Anglo-Norman invasion and the departure of colonial history in Ireland. This observation is supported by the introduction of the concept of *linguistic and cultural sovereignty* which says that different cultures form, at least in theory, sovereign entities where the right to make culture- or language-use-related decisions solely belongs to the community (see Tomlinson 1991: 6-7). Consequently, external dominance over decisions and practices which normally enable the community to regulate its own cultural and linguistic behaviour and lifestyles will result in *the violation of the cultural and linguistic sovereignty* of the community. The Anglo-Norman intervention caused the first real challenge to Ireland's cultural sovereignty and the long-term undermining of the political power of Irish. Since the Norman invasion prevented the formation of a politically sovereign Irish monarchy, which would also coincide with the primary use of Irish, never in its history could Irish become the dominant language of a politically independent state. This also meant that in the Anglo-Norman Times the process of language change commenced at the top of the feudal pyramid, in relation to the institution of medieval kingship.

In the 16th century the Tudors used Ireland as the first scene of England's modern expansive ambitions. Tudor-time English ideologists considered *cultural and linguistic assimilation* indispensable to the success of *permanent colonization*. Total Tudor power meant the nation-wide establishment of an English administrative system, the plantation of English speaking population groups as well as the systematic destruction of the social and institutional bases of native culture and language. It follows that by the end of the Tudor Era, the course of the irreversible language shift had been designated in Ireland: English acquired a dominant position whereas Irish was reduced to a subordinate status in its own language country. A significant language political response by the native community to the power shift in the linguistic domain was the abandonment of the native culture and the weakening of the generational transmission of the native language within the ranks of the indigenous aristocracy.

My language political study highlights certain connections between the 12th and the 16th centuries which have evaded academic attention so far. According to my observation, besides certain politico-historical transitions (Gillingham 1987), the Anglo-Norman and the Tudor periods also display continuities with regard to the Irish-English language shift, which, on the other hand, become explicable in terms of continuities in linguistic colonialism. I demonstrate these continuities by analyzing colonial discourse. Here I depart from the supposition that colonial discourse articulating colonial ideologies serves as both representation and method for the basic forces of colonialism, and that an analysis of this discourse focusing on statements related to culture and language, will inform us about the progress of cultural-linguistic colonization. My study compares texts of the Norman conquest and of the Tudor Times and proves that they display remarkable continuity: imperialist attitudes which describe the subjugated population and its culture as

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subordinate, uncivilized and barbarous and which justify colonization by claims of cultural superiority on the part of the colonizing community are present in the discourses of both periods. Negative stereotypes stigmatizing the Irish language and civilization originate in the texts of the 12th-century invasion of Ireland, and gain ideological reinforcement and extension in the texts of the Tudor conquest. My findings demonstrate that colonial ideologies and negative stereotypes about the language and culture of the colonized constituted a vital factor in the language shift: the fact that the colonized community accepted and internalized the negative stereotyping about their language served as the mental precondition of language shift. The seven-hundred-year long process of the Irish-English language change advanced within the Irish social hierarchy from the aristocracy to the poor, rural population as the negative linguistic ideologies constructed by the colonizer gradually gained recognition and adoption by the same social groups of the native society.

The fact that the language-political ground of the irreversible language shift had been laid in the Tudor Times is clearly indicated by changes in the state and status of Irish in the 17th and 18th centuries. Numerically the language still enjoyed a strong position but otherwise it was transforming into a means of communication that was devoid of a modern standard, became geographically fragmented and shrinking and existed in oral, dialectal forms, primarily in the homes of the rural population. Restriction to oral use prevented Irish from spreading as a language of the press and the printed media. Thus, English became the language of newspapers and modern journalism in Ireland (see Anderson 1991). This also meant that Irish failed to gain ground in modern political language use and that modern Irish nationalism acquired linguistic expression in English in the following centuries.

The advancing language shift absorbed further social groups: by the end of the 18th century most of the native urban middle classes had also been Anglicized. As is revealed by contemporaneous discourse, they had accepted the cultural and linguistic consequences of colonization – that is, the Anglicization of Ireland – and they increasingly identified themselves as English speakers (see e.g. O'Conor 1753).

The latter half of the 18th century also witnessed attitudinal changes to Irish among the linguistically most conservative rural population. This can be demonstrated by an examination of the so called *Hedge School*s (see e.g. Corcoran 1928, Dowling 1968). These grassroots, private schools were called to life and maintained by poor, rural people in the face of the Penal Laws by which the dominant Protestant elite prohibited all kinds of Catholic education. Although at the time of their foundation in the early 18th century most Hedge Schools specialized in Irish and Classical languages, by the end of the century they had become important scenes of formal English teaching for the lower native classes – the latter development having been initiated by the requirements of the otherwise Irish-speaking parents. It follows then that although the lowest-ranking rural population still displayed mass use of Irish in the late 18th century, its linguistic attitude already reflected transitions towards English. The tendency that the poor native parents wished to obtain English language education for their children demonstrates a loss of status for Irish even among the most backward, rural groups. On the other hand, English was

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becoming the language of prestige, associated with social and economic mobility in the linguistic value system of the same group.

The 19th century should be viewed as the closing phase of the language shift. Several analyses of the Irish language question adopt the term "Great Language Shift" to describe 19th-century linguistic processes. By doing so they refer to the big numerical drop of the monolingual Irish from 2.5-3 million to 21,000, and imply that the 19th century was the most decisive period in the prolonged language change. However, my findings reveal that the, admittedly unprecedented and unparalleled, numerical shift was the predictable outcome of tendencies characterizing the previous centuries. Its extraordinary nature derived from the size of the related population, and from the speed these poor native masses abandoned their mother tongue in the course of a few decades. Nevertheless, in its mental state and linguistic attitudes, even this social group had been prepared for the language change at the turn of the 19th century, and the rapid abandonment of their mother language can be interpreted as their collective language-political response to 19th-century developments in Ireland.

The most dramatic of all these was the Great Famine of 1845-48, which mostly hit the poor Irish mono- and bilinguals in the western and southwestern regions of the country. To the hunger-stricken agricultural population the potato famine seemed to prove the validity of those negative stereotypes about Irish which originated from the 12th-century Anglo-Norman conquerors of Ireland, and the close relationship between poverty, backwardness, lack of education and their native tongue became an unquestionable reality for them. Their language-political reactions included the denial of Irish, the internalization of its stigmatization, and the forced and deliberate disruption of its transmission in one or two generations.

Further social response was mass emigration, which also contributed to the acceleration of the language shift with the active participation of the natives. Since mass emigration from that time on became a permanent feature of Irish society, and since the target countries of migration were English speaking, the acquisition of English at a young age, at home and at school, was seen by these groups as preparation for a better life.

On the other hand, these processes took place within the frame of the British-Irish Union, which came into force in 1801 and provided the British Government with direct control over Ireland. My research draws parallel between the strategies of the Tudor and of the 19th-century British state machineries aiming at English cultural and linguistic assimilation in Ireland. However, I also demonstrate that with the attempted political centralization and socio-cultural homogenization, the 19th-century British state effected remarkable modernization in the country. Since the linguistic context of all modernization was English, its institutions – like public education, administration, health care, national postal, police and rail services –, which offered career opportunities, social mobility and financial security, incited the masses to language change.

Public primary education, introduced in Ireland by the British government in 1831, also fits into this complex language-political context. A conservative view holds that the so called *National Schools*, which were of English medium even in Irish monolingual districts, played the most important part in the "murder of Irish" in the 19th century (see e.g. Corcoran 1928, Pearse 1916). Undoubtedly, the schools

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functioned as important means of cultural and linguistic assimilation in the policy of the British state. However, their efficiency in bringing the Irish-English language shift to an abrupt close largely depended on the strong motivation of the native population to learn English – the origins of which can be traced to the late 18th century Hedge Schools. In fact, we can claim that the role of the English National Schools in the Irish-English language shift is one of those language-political dilemmas which can only be fully explored by the balanced consideration of the following three components: policy measures by the assimilating power; active participation by the target population of assimilation in its own language shift; and the right and access of the minority community to those forms of assimilation which provide them with existential security and progress (see Szépe 2001: 107, Szépe-Derényi 1998: 9).

5. Conclusions

My language political study yields the following conclusions. The Irish-English language shift was a prolonged process which was taking shape from the late 12th century to the turn of the 20th century, during the presence of the English state in Ireland, and amid the conditions and consequences of colonization. The most decisive phases of the language shift included the Anglo-Norman invasion of the late 12th century, which effected the violation of the cultural and linguistic sovereignty of Ireland; the Tudor conquest, which laid the language political basis of the irreversible language shift; the 17th and 18th centuries, which spread negative attitudes to Irish, positive attitudes to English and their transformation into collective language-political responses all over the native society; and the 19th century, which brought about the accelerated and numerically significant conclusion of the language shift.

The over 700-year long linguistic change was gradually gaining ground within the Irish social hierarchy from top to bottom. It commenced at the level of medieval kingship, advanced through the native aristocracy and the middle classes until it also absorbed the agrarian population of the westernmost countryside. Each consecutive stage of the process can be interpreted as language political response given by the involved social groups – accompanied and even preceded by the re-arrangement of their linguistic attitudes, linguistic value-system and language-political orientation.

The ideological frame of the process was constructed upon the grossly negative stigmatization of the Irish language and culture. This stigmatizing originated with the 12th-century Anglo-Norman invaders of Ireland, and can be traced throughout the colonial period in the cultural and linguistic attitudes of the dominant Anglo-Norman, English and Anglo-Irish groups. Under the conditions of colonization, the stigmatization of the native language was also adopted by the colonized social groups, in a process moving gradually down the social scale. The articulation of language-related ideologies and policies by the colonizer, and their acceptance by the colonized are present in those texts and discourses which were being produced by both sides throughout the language shift. These discourses constitute the textual representation and an important language-political component of the linguistic transformation, consequently, their analysis is indispensable to a proper understanding of Ireland's language-related historical phenomena.

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