

Towards Linguistic Diversity? Community Languages in Northern Ireland

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Debates surrounding language in Northern Ireland have ordinarily centred on the Irish language and Ulster-Scots. However, closer analysis suggests that there have long been other languages spoken in the region by long-established communities from China and the South Asian subcontinent. Recently, there has been a significant increase in migration from new European Union countries. Polish, Lithuanian and Portuguese migrants – many with limited English language skills – make up the majority of the new arrivals, although others have come from Latvia, Ukraine and Hungary.

Academic debates in numerous liberal democracies such as Canada, Australia, Britain and the United States have for many years focused on the issues around policies of multiculturalism and the potential for an inclusive form of civic participation (Parekh 2000, Kymlicka 2000). The debate on the use of language within both the private and the public sphere has often been closely related to these questions. Debates on multicultural policies and inclusion have taken much longer to be recognised as significant in the context of Northern Ireland, although this is now beginning to change as a new body of literature is starting to emerge (Holder 2003, Hainsworth 1998, Delargy 2007).

The aim of this paper is to contribute to this debate and to offer a background to communities that had hitherto been excluded from debates about language in Northern Ireland. The first section will identify the longest established minority ethnic communities and their languages. The second section looks specifically at the increased number of European languages that have arrived in more recent years.

Communities Identified in the 2001 Census

Throughout the 1990s, as the peace process continued, there was an increased awareness of diversity issues in Northern Ireland. A greater emphasis on equality issues and a growing body of international and European legislation, led to the introduction of the Race Relations order (1997) and section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998). Both section 75 and the Race Relations order function to eradicate discrimination and prejudice on racial grounds across a wide range of public and private sectors and it was possibly as a result of this legislation that a question on the issue of ethnicity was included for the first time in the 2001 Northern Ireland Census. Respondents were asked to identify themselves as either white, Irish Traveller, Mixed, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Other Asian, Black Caribbean, Black African, Other Black, Chinese or Other Ethnic Group. The results produced have been disputed, an issue that will be discussed later in this essay. Despite this the 2001 census is significant in that it was the first official recognition that other communities and cultures were established in Northern Ireland. The results of the census will be drawn upon alongside a situational overview in order to highlight some of the historic and current language issues for the longer established minority ethnic groups.

The Chinese Community

According to the 2001 census the Chinese community was the largest minority ethnic community in Northern Ireland. Migrants from China first came to the region in large numbers in the 1960s (NicCraith 2002: 21, Manwah Watson and McKnight 1998: 129), although other evidence suggests the presence of a small Chinese community living in Northern Ireland as early as the 1930s (Irwin and Dunn 1997: 76). Occupationally, the Chinese community is traditionally associated with the catering industry, as evidenced by the many hundreds of Chinese restaurants throughout the province. There is also a growing number involved in the area of traditional Chinese medicines, as well as a large student population of over 300 at Queen's University and the University of Ulster (BBC).

The size of the Chinese population in Northern Ireland is often disputed, and official and non-official sources differ by almost 5,000. For example, a study conducted by the University of Ulster in 1997 suggested that there were 3277 Chinese in Northern Ireland (Irwin and Dunn 1997), yet four years later the 2001 census reported a figure closer to 4,200 (HMSO 2001). The Chinese Welfare Association (CWA), the non-governmental agency working on behalf of the Chinese community in Northern Ireland, contests numbers are closer to 8,000 and argue that a number of factors, such as the absence of a census form

in Chinese, as well as an apprehension about the purpose of the census data itself, may contribute to the underestimates of the official statistics.

It is clear that there were issues with the census format in 2001, and the results cannot be regarded as totally accurate. However, closer analysis of the results is not without merit, and an indication is given of the geographical areas where long established minority ethnic communities have settled. Figure 1 suggests that over 50 per cent of Chinese respondents to the census had settled in Belfast and the surrounding areas. There were also sizeable communities of Chinese in Craigavon, Coleraine and Derry (See also McMullan and Nic Craith 2006).

Table 1: 1 Chinese Community in Northern Ireland

| <i>Council Area</i> | <i>Population of Chinese Community</i> | <i>Percentage of Chinese Population</i> |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Belfast | 1318 | 31.80% |
| Castlereagh | 403 | 9.10% |
| Coleraine | 155 | 3.70% |
| Craigavon | 222 | 5.40% |
| Derry | 143 | 3.40% |
| Lisburn | 245 | 5.90% |
| Newtownabbey | 322 | 7.80% |
| North Down | 205 | 4.90% |

Figure 1 (HMSO 2001)

There is a general misconception that the Chinese community in Northern Ireland speaks only one language, but this is not the case as China, with a population of some one and a half billion, has many linguistic traditions. The majority of Chinese in Northern Ireland use one of a variety of languages from the Sino-Tibetan linguistic group, the most prominent of which are Cantonese, Haka and Mandarin. Cantonese and Haka are spoken in southern areas of China where many of the initial Chinese immigrants had come from in the 1960s and as a result of this pattern these languages are also common in

Northern Ireland (Mawah-Watson and McKnight 1998, 129, Holder 2003). There are also a significant number of speakers of the Mandarin language confirmed by the existence of a Mandarin Speakers Association, an organisation that assists Mandarin speakers who have come not only from China itself, but also from 'Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore and Malaysia' (Mandarin Speakers Association).

Many Chinese are either self-employed or employed by family within the catering industry which has meant that interaction with the host community has proved difficult and one community representative in the North West has noted that this situation has maintained a *status quo* where the language barrier has not been challenged. The representative stated, '[t] The majority of arrivals were farmers and were not very well educated so that is why they came over here. They never learned English and they came here to labour, but the majority of them found work in Chinese takeaways where you don't have to talk to (local) people that much if you are working in the kitchen' (Personal Interview A). Ironically, second and third generations have acquired better standards of English, but this has resulted in some intergenerational difficulties within families. For instance, grandparents or even parents may only have skills in a Chinese language, whereas younger members of the community may have fluent English, but limited skills in the community language (Delargy 2007: 134).

Such problems have ultimately resulted in the development of a community sector dedicated to issues of relevance for the Chinese community. The Chinese Welfare Association (CWA), formed in 1986, is the largest organisation that offers assistance and advice to Chinese speakers in Northern Ireland (www.cwa-ni.org); it regards the language barrier as one of its most difficult and serious challenges. Anna Lo, former head of the Chinese Welfare Association and recently elected to the local assembly, once cited the example of one individual to identify the wider problems of an entire community:

The Chinese Community is the biggest ethnic minority group here and, yes, they do feel excluded, and they do feel discriminated on linguistic grounds. I remember an elderly man once stood up in a public seminar and he said 'I became deaf and dumb when I came to live in Northern Ireland'. This can be said for many of the Chinese people here in Northern Ireland. (Manwah-Watson 2000: 97)

The work of the CWA challenges these difficulties by providing interpreting, in order to improve access to services such as health and housing. The Association also organise after-school clubs for children requiring

additional English language assistance for school assignments and coursework. English classes for adult learners have also been offered for both beginner and intermediate level in conjunction with the Belfast Institute for Further and Higher Education (BIFHE) (now Belfast Metropolitan College). The CWA is also aware of the intergenerational difficulties and has continued to support a Chinese Language School as a place where Chinese teenagers can come and take lessons in either Cantonese or Mandarin.

Media provision is rare but the BBC has produced a short five-minute information programme on Radio Ulster called *Wah Yan Jee Sing*. The series is broadcast each Wednesday and offers information on social and cultural issues of importance. The series is broadcast in Cantonese only and is not bilingual which means that this it is an information programme not accessible to the local population. Chinese speakers have also recently been recognised in the homeland and a documentary was recently filmed by Chinese television on the community in Northern Ireland (BBC). The availability of audio-visual material is significant and has been utilised by other minority language communities to increase group confidence and visibility in the public space. Digital and broadcast media have the potential to support and assist other methods of language maintenance and learning such as education through the use of the Internet, CD-Rom and programming with a language learner emphasis (McDermott 2007).

All of these examples show that despite the difficulties, the Chinese community in Northern Ireland can be regarded as the most pro-active in terms of lobbying government bodies for greater changes. Although such developments are positive, one of the major concerns is that many of these initiatives take place in the greater Belfast region and not on a wider level. This may have contributed to a sense of isolation for those communities living elsewhere, and a more concerted effort could be made to make projects available throughout Northern Ireland.

Language Communities from the South-Asian Subcontinent

There are also a sizeable number of communities in Northern Ireland from the South-Asian Subcontinent. According to the 2001 census there were 1,567 members from India, 666 from Pakistan, and 252 from Bangladesh. Table 2 shows that settlement has primarily been in Derry, Belfast and Craigavon for the Indian and Pakistani communities. The Bangladeshi community is not as prominent in these areas and according to the census has settled mainly in Ards, and the North Down areas.

Table 1: 2 Communities in Northern Ireland from the Subcontinent

| <i>Council Area</i> | <i>Population of Individuals from the Subcontinent</i> | <i>% of population from Subcontinent</i> |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Ards | 84 | 3.3 |
| Belfast | 658 | 26.48 |
| Castlereagh | 151 | 6.08 |
| Coleraine | 101 | 4.06 |
| Craigavon | 214 | 8.61 |
| Derry | 243 | 9.78 |
| Lisburn | 122 | 4.91 |
| Newtownabbey | 183 | 7.36 |
| North Down | 120 | 4.83 |

Figure 2 (Adapted from HMSO 2001)

Historically, the Indian community first arrived in large numbers in the 1920s and 1930s with further migration occurring in the 1940s (Kapur 1997). In the 1940s the first migrants arrived from the area now known as Pakistan with the initial members of the Bangladeshi community arriving in the late 1960s from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Bangladeshis continued to arrive throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s with more recent arrivals generally having an initial period of settlement in England (Working With Diversity a).

Many of those coming from India to Northern Ireland in the 1940s settled in the North West, particularly in Derry. A number of those became involved in the retail business in the city and set up their own establishments, some of which are trading to this day (Irwin and Dunn 1997 and Kapur 1997). Other members of the Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi communities have become professionals, such as solicitors, doctors, and university lecturers. The other major occupation is in the catering industry with a considerable number of Indians and Bangladeshis working in Indian restaurants. This is a factor that has added to the perceived invisibility of Bangladeshis in the region (Working With Diversity Website a).

Like the case of the Chinese Community, the languages of these three national groups reflect the diversity of cultures, religions and language that one would find in the Subcontinent itself. Previous reports suggest that within the Indian community there are at least 10 languages spoken. The most commonly used are, Hindi, Punjabi, English, Tamil, Kannada, Kanta, Malayala, Marati, Oriya and Telugu (Holder 2003: 45). Pakistanis also speak a number of different languages; these include, Punjabi, Urdu, and English, as well as Beluchi, Sindhi, Pustu, and Mirpuri (Holder: *ibid*). The fact that many Pakistanis in Northern Ireland are Muslim also means that Arabic may be used as a religious language in private. However, within the Belfast Mosque the main language of use is English (Marranci 2007: 175). The language of choice within the Bangladeshi community is Sylheti and has been described as a dialect of the Bengali language; it is claimed that it is spoken by 80-85 per cent of the Bangladeshi population in Northern Ireland (Holder 2003: 49, Holder 2001).

Significant support mechanisms for the communities in Northern Ireland include, the Indian Community Centre in Belfast, The Belfast Islamic Centre, and the Gurdwara temple for Sikh worship in the North West. There was also a mosque established by Pakistanis in Northern Ireland in the Craigavon area as early as the 1970s (Marranci 2007: 169). Arts Ekta, a recently established cultural and arts body, has attempted to promote cultural diversity through the arts. One of the most recent events at the University of Ulster celebrated the Diwali festival of lights. The spaces provided by these organisations function primarily as support mechanisms for culture and religion, but do not ordinarily offer specific projects in community languages. However, such spaces are vitally important as they allow the opportunity for community languages to be spoken and therefore increase cultural confidence and this was noted by a representative of Arts Ekta who suggested that community language is commonly heard at their events (Personal Interview B).

Language barriers are not as evident an issue as they are for the Chinese community as noted by the representative of Arts Ekta (*ibid.*). Despite this, there is evidence to suggest that like the Chinese, first generation and elderly female members from the South Asian subcontinent have low English proficiency. Ironically, this is also a problem for very young children and reports from the Department of Education suggest that Indian languages are still very common among pupils in schools in Northern Ireland (DENI 2005: 17). This suggests that many children from an Indian background use their own languages in the family home and have limited language skills in English when they first enter primary education.

Communities not represented in the 2001 Census

In addition to the communities referred to in the 2001 census there are many other groups in Northern Ireland that commonly use languages other than English. A sizeable Portuguese speaking community arrived from Portugal, Cape Verde, East Timor and Brazil in the period around 2000 (Holder 2003, Soares 2002). The accession of eight new member states to the European Union in May 2004 further facilitated the arrival of workers from Lithuania and Poland in particular. Figures recently released revealed that there were 7,805 foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland in 2003 and by 2006 this number had risen to 18,384 (McGlade 2006: 1). The result has been particularly visible in areas such as South Tyrone where the economy has drawn on new migrants to help maintain industries which would likely have not continued without such support (Animate 2005: 3). The arrival of so many non-English speakers can also be measured in other ways. Figures for interpreting assistance by public services in 2005 revealed that Portuguese, Polish and Lithuanian collectively accounted for 70% of the entire requests in this period (Mc Veigh and Fisher 2006: 19). The following section of this paper looks at how three language communities have established themselves in the region through their own initiatives as well as with the support of the local population.

The Portuguese Speaking Community

The Dungannon area in particular has become the district with the largest concentration of Portuguese migrant workers with estimates from a variety of sources suggesting that there are well over 1000 members of the community in Northern Ireland (Working With Diversity Website b). Agencies, working on behalf of meat processing factories, have undertaken recruitment drives and usually offer contracts of between six months and one year to young men. One previous study noted that it is quite rare for an individual to renew their contract of employment and they will generally return to home after the initial period expires meaning that this has become a transient community (Saors 2002).

The majority of Portuguese speakers in Northern Ireland are from Portugal, but there are also a substantial number from former colonial territories such as Brazil, Mozambique, Cape Verde and East Timor. Proficiency in English varies, and one report has suggested that in 2002 only 45% had a good, very good, or fluent command of the English language (Ibid: 9). This would indicate that provision of language services was required in order to assist public services and individuals. The South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP) is an NGO and has seemingly taken the

lead in providing this support. The organisation was formed in 1997 in order to support cross-community schemes between Catholics and Protestants; however, as Dungannon has become increasingly multicultural, the Portuguese speaking community have become one of the main beneficiaries of the project. Interpreting services are available for housing, policing and educational issues through a migrant support centre maintained by STEP (www.stepni.org).

Previous literature on this particular linguistic group has tended to focus on negative issues, such as racism by the host community, and lack of community spirit (Holder 2005, Saores 2002). Work of this nature is undoubtedly significant; however, despite numerous examples of good practice throughout Northern Ireland, little focus has been placed on such evidence. There are numerous examples of good practice within the Dungannon area. For instance, in 2004 the local newspaper, *The Tyrone Courier*, became the first newspaper in Ireland to publish a column in a migrant language (Sunday Business Post-Online). ‘Mundo Luso’, meaning the world of the Portuguese Speaker, provided a bilingual column with information and news in both Portuguese and English. Also in 2004 the local cinema organised a film festival that featured subtitled films from Portugal, and which attempted to provide a cross-cultural focal point for both the host community and the incoming communities. In addition to this the BBC recently produced a short film called *Tiago and the Tunnel*, which charted the experiences of a ten-year-old boy from Portugal now living in Northern Ireland. In 2004 the European Football championships were hosted by Portugal, and at this time one of the local public houses became a focal point for members of the community. This received attention in both the regional and the local press and, in one interview with the Irish News, the manager of the establishment noted that, ‘It’s a standing joke around here to hear the Portuguese people referred to as ‘the locals’’ (Mc Cann 2004: 2). During the championships there were T-shirts printed saying, ‘get behind the locals’, which were worn by the staff, customers and members of the community (ibid). Recognition of the community has also come from home and in June 2004 the Portuguese Secretary of State, Antonio Braga, visited Dungannon to celebrate the national day.

Polish Speakers

The largest of the new language communities in Northern Ireland comes from Poland, and several sources state that there are now over 30,000 Polish workers in the region (Rankin 2007). Many of those who have arrived have come to work in meat processing factories, local harbours and docks; this is generally true of those who have a poorer standard of English. A smaller

number with better English have occupations in catering and information call centres. Overall, command of English is generally regarded as being poor, yet interviewees have suggested that most Polish people in Northern Ireland have at least some basic language skills that are sufficient for routine living, but insufficient for accessing vital services. As a result, a number of non-governmental organisations have been established in order to provide assistance for individuals accessing public services. The Polish Welfare Association deals specifically in the North West of the province, and The Polish Association of Northern Ireland is based in Belfast.

Another important development has been the publication of a Polish language magazine *Glosik*, meaning little voice. One of the founders of the magazine has described the magazine as having two aims,

The magazine has two aims, the first of which is to help the Polish community to integrate in Northern Ireland, and the second is to communicate culture both to the Polish and the Northern Irish in order to develop links. We have regular sections in the magazine where we cover history and sport, we also have an advice section in the magazine, and we have a cultural section in the magazine with reviews of books and events across Northern Ireland. (Personal Interview C)

The Polish community in Northern Ireland rarely avail of local media, and the magazine is their most vital form of information: this is particularly true for non-English speakers in the region. However, one woman with fluent English language capacity acknowledged its importance for her by noting that she rarely has alternative opportunities to get news or even read in her own language here (Personal Interview D). There are also a number of alternative forms of written media available, and regular features in Polish have started to appear in a number of local papers. Some local libraries have also purchased titles in Polish. This is a particularly relevant approach as one of the interviewees noted that many Polish people commonly visited libraries here, as there is usually free access to the Internet there. Consequently, libraries themselves have become a place where many members of the community have initially met (Ibid.). Other media events have included the *Cinema Polska* season organised by the Nerve Centre in Derry. The event was designed in order to, 'provide a regular Polish cultural experience here for the people of Derry to gain an insight into Polish culture and for expatriate Poles to enjoy some classic and contemporary cinema from their homeland' (Nerve Centre 2006). Despite the success of the cinema season in attracting an audience from the local population, the attendance from Polish people was quite small. One

factor that may have contributed, which was discovered after the season had finished, was that the monthly mass for the community in the city took place at the same time. Organisers of the event acknowledged that they would be keen to do this project again on an outreach basis where they would take their equipment and show the films in the locale where the community are based (Personal Interview E). Similar schemes have followed in Belfast and at the University of Ulster in Coleraine.

The use of culture in promoting relations between the local population and new migrants has also been recognised as one of the most powerful ways in which to promote access to public space. In 2007 the Polish Association of Northern Ireland and *Glosik* magazine in conjunction with the Consulate of Poland in Edinburgh helped to organise a Polish cultural week in Belfast with a film event, a photographic exhibition and a piano concert. The week culminated with a Picnic in Botanic Gardens in Belfast. The whole aim of the week was to ‘share Polish cultural heritage with our Northern Ireland hosts and to help the Polish community to integrate in Northern Ireland.’ (Ziminska 2007)

There have also been other forms of recognition culturally within the community. Religion and the role of the church has been an enormously important support mechanism for the community throughout Ireland (see Delargy this volume). The establishment of a dedicated chaplaincy in Ireland has facilitated many masses in the Polish language. At present such services are held in 127 different towns, cities and villages throughout Ireland (The Polish Chaplaincy in Ireland). There are masses currently held in 16 different locations throughout Northern Ireland by a dedicated priest, Father Mariusz Dabrowski (Rankin 2007). The mass that is celebrated of course has religious significance for the community but it also functions as much more than this. In addition, the church building for a short while becomes a temporary community centre where people can come and meet and where information and materials such as the *Glosik* magazine can be distributed.

Lithuanian Speaking Community

A large number of migrant workers have also arrived in Northern Ireland from Lithuania and the Lithuanian language is now commonly heard throughout Northern Ireland in Dungannon, Enniskillen, County Down, Belfast and the North West. The primary employment sector is also in the meat processing industry but work in agriculture and the catering industry is also commonplace.

English language competency is generally quite poor which is reflected in the fact that of all interpreter requests to the health service Lithuanian was the third most requested language, after Portuguese and Polish, at 20% of entire requests (NIHSSIS 2006 3). In South Tyrone a number of organisations offer interpretation services in Lithuanian to assist public services. A number of local bodies, such as the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI), and the local education and library board provide much information on their corporate websites in Lithuanian.

One of the major difficulties has been for families with children because young children are learning English very quickly to the detriment of their Lithuanian language skills; this is particularly true of written skills. This is a situation that has caused considerable difficulty for families wishing to return home in the future and one woman living in Northern Ireland noted that friends of hers were initially very proud of their child's English language skills, 'A lot of Lithuanians who have children are so proud that their children learn very quickly. So they don't care that much about them forgetting Lithuanian. They say things like, 'my child is at school and she is so good, and she speaks English so well, and she has a local accent'. I think parents are very proud of their child because they can't learn English themselves' (Personal Interview F). It was noted that by the time the parents realised that the children had lost their language skills it was almost too late. In the Republic of Ireland a number of private Saturday schools have been set up by parents in order to help language maintenance for children. Such projects have been partly sponsored by the Lithuanian Government's Department for National Minorities and Lithuanians Living Abroad. It should be noted that schemes like this could be beneficial for those Lithuanians living in Northern Ireland if it is to avoid the similar situation of the Chinese community, which is now having to work to revive its languages among younger generations. This of course is a dilemma that is of importance for all of the recently arrived communities from new member states of the European Union.

Like the Polish community, Lithuanians rarely listen to local radio or watch television. The most popular media format is the *Saloje* magazine (meaning Island) produced in Dublin but widely circulated in the North. Like its Polish counterpart, *Glosik*, the magazine attempts to cover a wide range of social and cultural issues of importance in Lithuanian language. Similarly *Lietuvis*, a weekly magazine for the community in Great Britain and Ireland, is available in eleven European food stores throughout Northern Ireland.

Food stores have also become important focal points for both the Polish and Lithuanian communities in Northern Ireland. For instance one respondent

stated, ‘Yes the shops are definitely like social networks. I think that people with problems get to know each other, or help each other through the shops. For example, some women I know wanted to start a Lithuanian school on Saturdays so they left leaflets in the shops advertising this and they got a response’ (Personal Interview F). A Polish female also noted the importance of the shops, ‘The shops are important for communication between communities here and you will always see things like job advertisements there. I know that Polish people help each other through the shops because they leave notes or information there for other people to see. This is a pretty big thing for the community.’ (Personal Interview D)

The establishment of a non-governmental organisation for Lithuanians living in Northern has taken time to materialise and has been a major drawback. However, late in 2007 the initial meeting of a support group formed in Dungannon had taken place. The group is at an early stage of its development and it is still unsure as to what role it will take in the near future; whatever the outcome an organisation like this will undoubtedly help the community here.

Conclusion

From the evidence established in this chapter it is clear that previous assumptions of Northern Ireland as simply a bi-cultural society are untrue. Such beliefs have ignored the existence of numerous other communities, many of which have been well established for many years and others which are more recently arrived. These communities have become increasingly visible (and audible) in the public space as Northern Ireland moves from a place synonymous with only violence and division to an increasingly attractive locale, particularly for new citizens of the European Union. The increased use of languages other than English raises a huge debate as to how public services should respond to a linguistic diversity which affects the manner in which such services can be provided. This topic is too diverse to deal with in this paper but is the subject matter of the author’s current PhD research. Instead this chapter has functioned to highlight a linguistic diversity which has long been ignored in the region. The influence of many new communities will inevitably continue as generations settle in the region. Migration, cultural encounters and multilingual diversity should be viewed as a reality in Northern Ireland and awareness must be realised at both societal and private level. This should include schools, workplaces, universities, families *and* policy makers if the transition from a bicultural to a plural society is to succeed.

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Personal Interview B- With Representative of Arts Ekta project

Personal Interview C- With Representative of Glosik Magazine

Personal Interview D- With 27-year-old Polish female

Personal Interview E- With Representative of Cinema Polska season

Personal Interview F- With 28-year-old Lithuanian Female

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