Multilingualism in the English-speaking World

Pedigree of Nations

Viv Edwards

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In memory of Hannah Davies,
Rachel Williams and Nicole Bérubé

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Preface

Many people think of globalization as a recent phenomenon. In fact, the population movement we are currently witnessing is best seen as the second wave of a process that started several hundred years ago and became firmly rooted in the nineteenth century. Most people in the English-speaking world today can either trace their ancestry to another country or can name a member of their family who has embarked on the great adventure of migration.

In my own case, my great-aunt Rachel migrated from Wales to the USA in 1929. The farewell gift from the congregation of her chapel was a Welsh Bible with an inscription wishing her luck not in the 'new world' but in 'the other world'. Rachel did not return for 40 years, by which time both her parents had died. To all intents and purposes, the new world for which she departed might just as well have been the other world.

On one of many subsequent trips, she told us about a long-forgotten episode of family history. In the 1880s, her own grandmother had waited until her youngest son left school to start work at the age of 12, and had run away with the lodger to make a new life in the USA. The following year, she returned to her husband and the incident was conveniently forgotten. When asked at some point why she had decided to come back, she is reputed to have answered simply: 'The other one was even worse!'

This book has been inspired by a fascination with people like my great-aunt and my great-great-grandmother and the journeys they have made. It has also been moulded by my own childhood exposure to bilingualism in Wales and my work as an adult on the education of the 'new minorities' who have settled in the UK since the 1950s. It has provided an opportunity to weave the threads of my own experience into the much larger multilingual tapestry, which potentially enriches the lives of everyone in the English-speaking world.

My great-grandparents wrote a weekly letter to Rachel, who loved receiving letters but was less enthusiastic about writing. She would, I am sure, have far preferred the electronic conversations I have been able to have with friends and colleagues in several continents as I have worked on this book. I owe a debt of gratitude to the many people who provided me with material or feedback: Stephen May in Aotearoa/New Zealand; Michèle de Courcy, Michael Clyne and Ian Malcolm in Australia; Nicole Bérubé and Jim Cummins in Canada; Jim Anderson, David Crystal, Mira Katbamna, Paddy Ladd and Chris Morriss in the UK; and Diana Eades, Susan Dicker and Anne Sienkewicz in the USA. Finally, my thanks to my husband, Chris Morriss, for his practical and moral support over several months of enforced house arrest with a prolapsed disc, which – ironically – allowed me to complete this book.

In keeping with the spirit of this book, and following the lead of Stephen May, I have deliberately departed from the publishing convention of italicizing non-English words, as a visual metaphor designed to make the point that minority languages are in fact a normal part of life in English-dominant countries.

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University of Reading

Part I

The extent of diversity

1

The myth of monolingualism

In *Tour to the Hebrides*, Samuel Johnson remarks: ‘I am always sorry when any language is lost, because languages are the pedigree of nations.’[1] Pedigrees are concerned, of course, with historical antecedents; but they are also helpful in interpreting the present and predicting the future. This book will venture well beyond the Hebrides to chart the influence of other languages on the English-speaking world. The aim will be to throw light on the social and historical complexities of relationships among the many different peoples who make up the English-speaking world, and the languages they speak.

Given the importance of English as a global language, this focus on multilingualism may seem perverse. English is used in some capacity by at least a billion people worldwide. Different people, of course, use English in different ways. In some countries, it is the majority language; in others, it is spoken as a second language for ‘official’ purposes such as education and government; in still others, it is learned as a foreign language in schools. The notion of concentric circles is useful in explaining these different patterns.[2] In the ‘inner-circle’ countries – the UK, Ireland, Canada, the USA, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand – English is the native language of the majority. In the ‘outer-circle’ countries, such as India and South Africa, English was introduced by colonial governments and remained an official language, alongside selected local languages, after independence. In ‘expanding-circle’ countries, such as China and Japan, English is a foreign language used for purposes of wider communication. The pre-eminence of English lies, in fact, in the combined numbers of native, second-language and foreign-language speakers.

In the inner-circle countries that will form the focus for this book, the ability to speak English is considered such an asset that many find it difficult to understand the need for other languages. This monolingual

The scale of linguistic diversity in the English-speaking world is greater today than at any point since the mass migrations of the nineteenth century. Photograph by Dave Andrews.

mindset can be traced to nineteenth-century Europe and the rise of the nation state, when one dominant group at the core achieved political and economic control of the periphery. Whereas the Greek, Roman and Austro-Hungarian empires were more concerned with collecting taxes than imposing a single language, nation states made systematic attempts to assimilate minorities and their languages.[3] European views on language were transported to the colonies, helping to perpetuate the monolingual myth. On a global scale, multilingualism remains the norm. And, even in the English-speaking world, an astonishing diversity of languages lies just beneath the veneer of homogeneity.

The extent of diversity

So how clear a picture, then, do we have of multilingualism in inner-circle countries? Sadly, the statistics that are often cited are seldom more than educated guesses, even in the case of the best-documented languages. Estimates of the numbers of English speakers in the outer-circle countries, for instance, range from 98 million to 518 million.[4] Estimates for expanding-circle countries are even more contentious: from 100 million to 1,000 million. Other languages face similar challenges.

Population censuses are an important source of information on language use. Some censuses, however, are more helpful than others: the UK collects data only on the Celtic languages; the Republic of Ireland covers only Irish. But even when the scope is much broader, the census is a blunt instrument. One problem is the compliance of respondents. In Ireland, the main purpose of early population counts was to gather information for taxation and military purposes. The census was predictably treated with extreme caution and it was not until the nineteenth century that the Catholic clergy encouraged the faithful to give accurate information.[5] More recently in the 2001 Canadian census, enumeration was not permitted, or was interrupted, on many First Nations reserves and settlements.

Questions are sometimes confusing or ambiguous. Many people who responded positively to an item in the 1991 census of Northern Ireland about 'knowledge of the language' may in fact have had only very limited fluency, thus creating a healthier picture than was actually the case. In other instances, ambiguity results in underestimates. There is a strong probability that some members of minority communities in Australia interpreted a question about languages spoken *in the home* too literally.[6] Many younger people who speak only English with their partner and children may use a different language when visiting other members of the family, or when taking part in community events. People living on their own may also have failed to report other languages. The fact that there are no explanatory notes means that responses to census questions are likely to be of the 'rough-and-ready' variety.

Indigenous languages

Putting to one side the problems associated with data collection, what general picture emerges of linguistic diversity in the inner-circle countries? An obvious place to start is with the languages spoken by the Indigenous peoples of the new worlds of North America and the Antipodes. These worlds were not, of course, new to the peoples who had inhabited them for millennia before the arrival of Europeans.

The impact of colonization was catastrophic. Populations were decimated by the introduction of new diseases and the genocidal impulses of Europeans. Attempts were made to assimilate forcibly those who escaped slaughter and disease by separating children from their parents in residential boarding schools where English-only policies were rigorously enforced. Indigenous people were denied full participation in mainstream society until the late twentieth century. Statistics for a range of indicators – over-representation in prisons, educational underachievement, unemployment, health, life expectancy – show conclusively that they remain more marginalized and disadvantaged than any other group. The social, political and economic pressures to abandon traditional languages are enormous, and the fact that the languages survive at all is a remarkable testimony to the cultural integrity of these peoples.

Indigenous peoples today make up varying proportions of the population of inner-circle countries – 14 per cent in Aotearoa/New Zealand, 3.3 per cent in Canada, 2.2 per cent in Australia, and 1.5 per cent in the USA. The languages they speak have several things in common. The first is the astonishing diversity that greeted Europeans on their arrival: well over 300 different languages in North America,[7] and between 200 and 250 in Australia.[8] Of these, fewer than 200 survive in North America and only 50 in Australia. Even the remaining languages are spoken by ever-decreasing numbers of people. Only a quarter of respondents who identified themselves as North American Indian, Métis or Inuit in the 2001 Canadian census – some 235,075 individuals – reported that they had enough knowledge of an Aboriginal language to carry on a conversation. According to the 2001 census, two of the most important Australian languages – Warlpiri and Arrente – had just 2,937 and 2,444 speakers, respectively.

Established languages

The situation in the British Isles is a little different. The distance between the languages and cultures of the original Celtic peoples and the English imperialists is far smaller than the distance between European colonists and Indigenous peoples. None the less, these 'established' languages – to use the terminology of Stacy Churchill[9] – occupy a similar niche and the health of Celtic languages is a matter of considerable concern.

With very few exceptions, extinction is for ever, although on rare occasions language decay has been reversed or at least delayed. Cornish revivalists, few but active, continue to promote the language, and over 1,000 people on the Isle of Man – some 2 per cent of the population – reported that they used Manx Gaelic in the 2001 census. Scottish Gaelic has a much more solid base but is none the less extremely vulnerable. In the decade between 1991 and 2001, the number of speakers dropped from 65,980 to 58,650, just over 1.2 per cent of the population of Scotland. Irish is much stronger. In Northern Ireland, 4.6 per cent are able to speak, read and write the language, but in the Irish Republic, this proportion rises to 43 per cent – just over 1.43 million people. However, statistics for frequency of language use suggest that Irish is less healthy than it might at first appear. Nearly two-thirds of those recorded as Irish speakers say that they never use the language or that they speak it less frequently than once a week. The most encouraging picture emerges from Wales, where the 2001 census reported the first increase in both the number and percentage of Welsh speakers since records have been kept. Almost 21 per cent of the population now speak the language.

Any discussion of established languages in the UK also needs to consider Scots, which has an estimated 1.5 million speakers in Scotland and a further 100,000 speakers in Northern Ireland.[10] The Scots battle for recognition centres on whether it should be considered a language in its own right or a dialect of English. Several other communities are involved in similar struggles, including speakers of Ebonics or Black English in the USA, Australian Aboriginal English and Hawai'ian Creole English.

Sign languages confront an even bigger obstacle: the battle for recognition as languages at all. Ignorance about sign is widespread. It is commonly assumed, for instance, that there is just one universal language. In fact, sign languages vary in the same way as their spoken counterparts. British Sign Language (BSL), the preferred language of the Deaf community in the British Isles, is distinct from the American Sign Language (ASL) used in North America. ASL, in turn, is distinct from Auslan, the sign language of Australia, and the closely related Aotearoa/New Zealand

Sign Language. Numbers are difficult to estimate: not all censuses collect information on sign languages and the accuracy of those which do is open to question.[11] It is likely, though, that BSL has well in excess of 70,000 users;[12] over 40,000 people in Canada and much larger numbers in the USA use ASL; Auslan is the preferred language of an estimated 15,400 people;[13] and a further 27,000 reported using Aotearoa/New Zealand Sign Language in the 2001 census.

Other languages might also qualify as established languages. French and Spanish, for instance, have a special status as colonial languages that arrived in North America at the same time as or earlier than English. The French presence on the continent extended at one point in an enormous arc from the Hudson in the north to the Mississippi in the south. Following defeat in eighteenth-century European conflict, France abandoned its colonies and large-scale immigration came to a halt. Some French-speaking strongholds, however, remained. At the beginning of the eighteenth century large numbers of Acadians – or Cajuns – who had been expelled from eastern Canada were resettled in Louisiana. French remained a supplementary language in the state until the 1920s and the French government continued to support the teaching of the language in secondary schools through much of the twentieth century. Over 1.6 million people reported themselves as speaking French, Cajun or Patois in the 2001 US census.

The main stronghold of French in North America is, of course, in Canada, where the 2001 census recorded almost 6.8 million Francophones, almost a quarter of the population. Of these, 86 per cent live in Quebec, and over three-quarters of the rest are concentrated in New Brunswick and Ontario. Two features ensure the continuing strength of this community: its sheer size and its concentration in and around Quebec. The fact that French is a world language also reinforces its position. But, unlike Welsh or Irish or Gaelic in the British Isles, if French disappeared from Canada or the USA, it would continue to be spoken in many other locations.

New minorities

After accounting for Indigenous and established languages, some writers group other languages together under the label of 'new minorities'. Yet this distinction is sometimes difficult to maintain. Take the case of Spanish. The first European settlers in North America were the Spanish and Spanish Mexicans who founded colonies in Florida, the southwest and California. Two factors – the special political relationship with Puerto

Rico and ongoing interaction with the peoples of Mexico – ensured a steady flow of new Spanish speakers throughout the twentieth century. Political crises and changes in immigration policy have swelled traditional Hispanophone communities with new arrivals from Cuba and Central and South America. Spanish is currently second only to English in the USA, with over 28 million speakers. It is a moot point whether Spanish speakers should be treated as an established or a new minority.

World War II was a watershed not only for the new worlds but also for the old. The UK, the most important source of migrants to the inner-circle countries, became a net importer for the first time when large numbers of outer-circle citizens began arriving from the British Commonwealth to help fuel post-war expansion. Ireland, for its part, remained an exporter of people until membership of the European Union transformed the economy in the 1990s. Countries which had traditionally depended on the British Isles – Canada, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand – needed to look elsewhere to supply their labour needs, and immigration in the late decades of the twentieth century reached levels very similar to those at the height of mass immigration at the beginning of the century.

Ironically, the same processes of globalization that helped establish English as the world's pre-eminent language have been responsible for the increasing linguistic diversity of inner-circle countries. In the 2001 Canadian census, one in every six people reported a mother tongue other than English or French; more than 100 different languages were recorded. The twentieth century saw the transformation of Australia from an overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic population to one of the world's most multicultural societies. The 2001 Australian census reported that 142 languages, in addition to Aboriginal languages, were spoken by just over one in six of the population. According to the 2000 census, the equivalent proportion for the USA was even higher: one in five. Aotearoa/New Zealand is less diverse than the other inner-circle countries: about four-fifths are of European origin, mainly from the British Isles, but, even here, the population has become much more diverse in recent times.

The dismantling of 'Whites-only' policies in the 1960s means that the languages spoken by newer migrants are much more varied than in the past. Chinese, for instance, is currently the most common language after English in Australia, the most common language after French and English in Canada, the most common language after English and Spanish in the USA, and the most common language after English, Māori and Samoan in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Tagalog now appears in the top ten languages of the USA, Canada and Australia.

Table 1 *The other languages*[14]

Rank	*UK*	*USA census 2000*	*Canada census 2001*	*Australia census 2001*	*Aotearoa/ New Zealand census 2001*
1	Bengali	Spanish (28,101,000)	Chinese (872,000)	Chinese (386,000)	Samoan (81,000)
2	Panjabi	Chinese (2,022,000)	Italian (681,000)	Italian (354,000)	Chinese (70,000)
3	Gujarati	French (1,644,000)	German (636,000)	Greek (264,000)	French (50,000)
4	Hindi/ Urdu	German (1,383,000)	Spanish (611,000)	Arabic (including Lebanese) (209,000)	German (34,000)
5	Turkish	Tagalog (1,224,000)	Panjabi (339,000)	Vietnamese (174,000)	Dutch (26,000)
6	Arabic	Vietnamese (1,010,000)	Arabic (290,000)	Spanish (94,000)	Tongan (23,000)
7	English-based creoles	Korean (894,000)	Portuguese (265,000)	Tagalog (79,000)	Hindi 23,000)
8	Yoruba	Russian (706,000)	Polish (250,000)	German (76,000)	Japanese (20,000)
9	Somali	Polish (667,000)	Tagalog (245,000)	Macedonian (72,000)	Korean (16,000)
10	Chinese	Portuguese (565,000)	Hindi (227,000)	Croatian (70,000)	Spanish (15,000)

Despite issues of reliability, several observations can be made with confidence. Linguistic diversity is very much a fact of life in the inner-circle countries. The scale of this diversity is greater now than at any point since the mass migrations of the nineteenth century. The languages in question, however, originate from a much wider range of countries than the European nations, which fuelled earlier migrations.

Pedigree of nations

It is perhaps to be expected that any discussion involving large numbers of languages in six different national contexts over several centuries will generate some terminological confusion. The wide range of ways of referring to Indigenous peoples in North America gives a flavour of the complexity. The Canadian constitution, for instance, recognizes three distinct Aboriginal peoples: Indians, Inuit and Métis.[15] Many people today, however, prefer 'First Nations' to 'Indians', because of the colonial connotations of the latter term. Similar debates have taken place in the USA. 'Indians' was replaced in the 1970s by Native Americans. However, to avoid confusion with the indigenous peoples of Alaska, the legally accepted term is now 'American Indians and Alaskan Natives'.

Another area of confusion concerns the teaching of minority languages. In the UK, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, most people talk in terms of 'community languages'; in the USA and Canada, 'heritage languages' are the norm; Australians also refer to 'languages other than English' or LOTEs. A further complication arises in relation to the target group for teaching. Most people think of heritage language programmes as designed for the children of recently arrived minorities; some writers, however, also apply this term to teaching that takes place in Indigenous communities.

Attempts to impose structure on such a complex subject inevitably involve some arbitrary decisions. Hopefully the decisions I have taken will assist – and not frustrate – the reader. In this first part of the book, I explore the extent of diversity in inner-circle countries. In the pages that follow, I trace the roots of diversity from the sixteenth century to modern times. I also look at issues of social inclusion: patients need to communicate with health professionals; defendants and witnesses with lawyers and the police; parents with their children's teachers. Although most minority-language speakers are bilingual, new arrivals need support to participate in the life of the wider community. The provision of services in other languages is also important for people who understand and speak English but none the less feel more comfortable using the heritage language.

In the second part of the book, I look at language in two very important domains: home and school. Parents, family and community play a critical role in passing minority languages from one generation to the next. I explore a range of reasons – social, intellectual and economic – for bringing up children bilingually, as well as the support structures that help families achieve this end. School has an important influence on language maintenance and shift. An historical overview – from pioneer days to World War II – provides a context for understanding a range of contemporary issues: is linguistic diversity a problem to be overcome or a resource to be nurtured? If other languages are to be used in formal schooling, which approaches produce the best results? What are the opportunities for English-speaking students to acquire other languages?

The third and final part of the book focuses on the role of other languages in the wider community: the economy, the media, the arts, and diplomacy and defence. I look at the benefits of other languages in business settings and at the double standards of the dominant English-speaking group. I consider the complex course which members of minority communities steer between minority and mainstream media in ways that meet their needs and interests. I examine the importance of traditional forms of artistic expression, as well as performances and creations which cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. I also look at the crucial role which competence in other languages plays in the post-11-September world, both in terms of intelligence gathering and diplomacy, and as a means of ensuring justice. Pedigrees are not only about looking back; they also help us to predict what might come next. I end by taking stock of the arguments for and against diversity and speculating on the future.

Notes

1 Boswell (1785).
2 Kachru (1985).
3 See, for instance, May (2001: 5–7).
4 Graddol (1999).
5 Ó Dochartaigh (2000: 7).
6 Clyne and Kipp (2002).
7 Francis and Reyhner (2002).
8 Romaine (1991).
9 Churchill (1986: 6–7).
10 Smith (2000); Kirk and Ó Baoill (2001).
11 Clyne and Kipp (2002).
12 McPake et al. (2002).
13 McPake et al. (2002).
14 The UK figures are based on a survey of London school children reported by Baker and Mohieldeen (2000: 5). Some sources give separate statistics for different Chinese languages, such as Mandarin and Cantonese; here all figures are conflated. Figures for all languages are rounded to the nearest 1,000.
15 The Métis people originated in the mid-1600s as children of Ojibway and Cree mothers and French and Scottish fur-trader fathers. Later, Scandinavian, Irish and English bloodlines became part of Métis heritage too.

2

Roots of diversity

The British Isles are the obvious starting point in a story of adventurism, colonization and empire, the first step in the journey which ultimately established English as a global language. The first casualties were the original languages of Ireland, Scotland and Wales but, with territorial expansion, the Indigenous languages of North America, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand were to sustain even greater losses.

The English were not, however, the only European power with colonial aspirations. They arrived in North America at the same time as or later than the Spanish and French, and the linguistic fate of the continent was unsettled for some time. As frontiers were extended in the USA and Canada, and Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand were added to the British empire, an ongoing stream of Anglo-Celts was joined by settlers from other European countries as part of the unprecedented mass migration of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A hundred years later, the forces of globalization had created a pool of labour from all parts of the developing world.

This chapter looks at the complex relationship of English with the other languages. Sometimes these languages have shown astonishing resilience and resistance; on other occasions, they have given way to English within the course of a few generations. In all cases, the past is the key to understanding the present.

British beginnings

The story of multilingualism in the English-speaking world today begins, of course, in the British Isles with the original settlers, the Celts. The linguistic landscape of the British Isles was further shaped by successive invasions of foreign powers – the Romans, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, the Vikings and the Normans. Speakers of two different branches of the Celtic language family were pushed to the western fringes: Goidelic retreated to what is now Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man; Brittonic to Brittany, Wales and Cornwall.[1]

Dolly Pentreath, the last known fluent speaker of Cornish, died in 1777.[2] Against all odds, an estimated 800 or so people involved in language revival speak Cornish fluently and almost 3,000 are able to hold a simple conversation in the language. The situation in the Isle of Man is similar. Ned Maddrell, the last native speaker of Manx Gaelic, died in 1974 at the age of 97,[3] and the language survives only through the efforts of some 2,000 committed individuals who have learned it as a second language. The other Celtic languages have fared better. Although they have been in decline for centuries, they have not only survived but, in some cases, are regaining ground.

Ireland

In its heyday, a period stretching from the sixth to ninth centuries, Irish was spoken not only in Ireland but in the coastal areas of southern and northern Britain, and most of present-day Scotland.[4] By the eighth century it had even replaced Latin as the main medium of literacy and religion. The physical proximity of Ireland and England made economic and political links between the two countries inevitable. When England first laid claim to Ireland in the Middle Ages, the impact was minimal, partly because the incomers were relatively few in number and partly because they shared the same religion. Although English gradually became the language of public affairs in urban areas, Irish remained the main language of everyday communication. In rural areas, Irish was the most important language for all sectors of society.

The sixteenth century marked an important turning point in attitudes to the language when Henry VIII issued a proclamation discouraging the use of Irish. By the middle of the next century large numbers of Scottish and English Protestants had replaced Irish landowners, forming a power base for the English crown, particularly in Ulster, with long-term consequences for Irish language and culture. This religious overlay, of course, provides the historical context for the ‘troubles’ of recent times.

By the eighteenth century, Irish had retreated to the poor and underdeveloped rural areas of the west, as wealthy rural property owners and the urban population shifted to English. At the time of the Act of Union with England in 1801, Irish speakers made up only 3.5 million of a total population of 5 million. The great social crises of the nineteenth century accelerated this decline. Even before the potato starvation years of 1846–50, the New World was a magnet for small farmers eking out an existence on land rented from absentee English landlords. A million deaths later, emigration to Britain, Australia and the USA continued to offer an escape from abject poverty.

Mass migration inevitably affected the linguistic balance in Ireland. Although very large numbers of those departing were Irish speakers, parents tended to give higher priority to ensuring that their children acquired the English they needed to survive in their new homes. None the less, according to some estimates, Irish may have been the second most widely understood language after English in Australia in the mid-nineteenth century,[5] and evidence in the form of personal journals, letters and columns in newspapers suggests that the language also survived for many years in the USA.[6]

With the emergence of the Irish Free State in 1921, Irish was made the national language and a focus for cultural and ethnic loyalty. Policy moved forward on several related fronts. Areas on the western periphery, where Irish was still widely spoken, were designated as the Gaeltacht. Here Irish was the language of education and public administration in an approach summed up as: ‘no jobs, no people; no people, no Gaeltacht; no Gaeltacht, no language’.[7] Considerable investment in the local economy was designed to ensure that the population stayed in place.

Outside the Gaeltacht, education was seen as the main tool in language revival. Irish was also used in public services. Yet, although Article 8 of the Constitution recognized both Irish and English as official languages, no provision was made for the exclusive use of either language, thus offering a convenient ‘get-out’ clause. Because high-ranking civil servants tended to favour English, the usefulness of Irish diminished as people made their way through the hierarchy.

This general approach had limited success. Census figures show an increase in the proportion of Irish speakers from 21.2 per cent in 1946 to 31.6 per cent in 1981. However, government policy failed to produce opportunities for speaking Irish in everyday life, leaving many people to conclude that time spent learning the language in school was, to some extent, wasted. Language promotion was left increasingly to voluntary bodies; the government pursued a course of benign neglect. Irish was no longer required to work in the civil service and only those wishing to teach in Irish-medium schools required a certificate of Irish competence.

Entry of the Republic into the EU in 1973 marked a new phase in official attitudes to Irish, redefined as a minority language, now promoted