

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Ulster University		
Unit of Assessment: Modern Languages and Linguistics (26)		
Title of case study: Driving Societal Transformation through Language Reform in Northern Ireland: Language Rights and Multilingual Speakers		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Philip McDermott	Senior Lecturer in Sociology	2009-present day
Dr Christina Sevdali	Senior Lecturer in Linguistics	2009-present day
Dr Niall Comer	Lecturer in Irish	2010-present day
Dr Catrin Rhys	Senior Lecturer in Linguistics	1995-present day
Dr Lynda Kennedy	Lecturer in Speech and Language Therapy	2017-present day
Prof Raffaella Folli	Professor of Linguistics	2005-present day
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Ulster research has driven legislative and societal transformation in relation to language in Northern Ireland (NI). First, experts at Ulster played a direct role in the transformation of legislation to recognise Irish language rights in NI, leading to the language occupying a central role in the development of the New Decade, New Approach programme for NI government. Second, our work has strengthened the profile of non-indigenous minority languages in post-conflict NI. Key impacts:</p> <p>I1: Influencing government policy on language of indigenous communities. I2: Driving the change of local council policies for minority languages. I3: Enhancing community relations through language. I4: Informing policy provision for Irish speakers. I5: Enhancing understanding of the benefit of bilingualism to communities, policy makers, practitioners. I6: Reducing the academic attainment gap of young multilingual speakers leading to their increased integration.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Two strands exist within our research underpinning impact work in transforming views on languages in NI.</p> <p>(1) <i>Language identities in post-conflict NI: Official recognition and reconciliation</i></p> <p>Language is fundamentally connected to the politics and culture of a place. In NI, people's affiliations to the Irish language or Ulster-Scots are often considered as markers of Irish or British identity respectively. This is challenging in the context of recent conflict and is vastly different from other UK indigenous language communities (e.g. Scottish Gaelic and Welsh).</p> <p>Work by McDermott (R2, R3, R4) and Comer (R1) has explored these sensitivities in detail and found that the improvement of language legislation and recognition for indigenous linguistic culture in public services, while challenging, is crucial in advocating reconciliation and raising awareness. Drawing on the European legislative framework, McDermott situates minority language policy internationally, finding that the relationship between the 'local' and the 'global' is crucial in providing pathways to recognition (R3, R4). While local authorities/national governments are often viewed as responsible for implementing change, powerful impetus for improvement comes from international treaties, conventions and human rights organisations. Comer's</p>		

work (R1) furthers this 'global'/'local' dynamic by identifying shortcomings in Irish language provision at public level in the light of international law.

(2) *The Benefits of Multilingualism: Supporting Speakers, Informing Policy Makers.*

A second theme in our research has been multilingualism for migrant populations. Folli, Sevdali, Kennedy and Rhys (R5, R6) demonstrated its substantial individual and societal benefits. Focusing on cases of transfer of linguistic features between the weak and dominant language of a multilingual child, they found that the weaker language can appear to affect the more dominant language in certain grammatical features in a predictable way. This indicates that innovative approaches are required to assist in supporting bilingual and/or multilingual ability.

Ulster's sociological research by McDermott (R2, R3, R4) has involved scoping linguistic environments through statistics, policy analysis and ethnography and has evidenced the multilingual reality of Northern Ireland and shortcomings in education, health and cultural policy where multilingual abilities are often ignored. McDermott demonstrated that a promotion of language policy for migrants by authorities requires an understanding of how languages are used in different places, e.g., educational environment, public, home or recreational spaces (such as museums and libraries).

Ulster researchers' work has found that migrants with higher levels of multilingual ability have higher socio-economic status and higher social and cultural capital which brings huge benefit to speakers and society generally (R2). Simply put, migrant community language maintenance alongside dominant language acquisition is central to integration, individual wellbeing and access to services.

3. References to the research Outputs can be supplied by Ulster University on request.

R1: Comer, N., Committee for the Administration of Justice and Conradh na Gaeilge, 2019. *Comhairlí Áitiúla, Dualgais agus an Ghaeilge: Creatlach Comhlíonta/Local Councils, Obligations and the Irish Language: A Framework for Compliance.* Dublin.

R2: McDermott, P., 2011. *Migrant Languages in the Public Space: A Case Study from Northern Ireland.* Münster: LIT Verlag.

R3: McDermott, P., 2019. From Ridicule to Legitimacy? 'Contested languages' and Devolved Language Planning. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 121-139.

R4: McDermott, P., 2012. Cohesion, Sharing and Integration? Migrant Languages and Cultural Spaces in Northern Ireland's Urban Environment. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 187-205.

R5: Devlin, M., Folli, F., Henry, A., and Sevdali, C., 2015. Clitic Right Dislocation in English: Cross-linguistic Influence in Multilingual Acquisition. *Lingua*, vol. 161, July, pp. 101-124.

R6: Kane, F., Kennedy, L., Sevdali, C., Rhys, C., and Folli, R., 2019. Language Made Fun: Supporting EAL Students in Primary Education. *Teanga: Multilingualism in the Early Years*, vol. 10, pp. 113-125.

The above body of work has been subjected to blind peer review practice by internationally based language commissioners and editorial boards.

Research grants

McDermott, Phillip – Inclusion, belonging and identity: cultural institutions and diaspora communities in NI. The British Academy/Leverhulme Trust (18.08.2014 - 18.08.2016) GBP4,465

Folli, Rafaella, Sevdali, Christina, Rhys, Catrin, and Kennedy, Lynda – Family Learning and Integration Hub. The Big Lottery Fund via Barnardo's NI (01.03.2016 - 28.02.2021) GBP27,395

McDermott, Philip – Linguistic Traditions, Policy and Public Identities in Scotland and N. Ireland: The Comparative Case of Scots and Ulster-Scots. Royal Irish Academy Charlemont Scholarship (01.01.2015 - 01.09.2015) EUR1,131.60 (01.2015)

McDermott, Philip – Diverse Perspectives on a Global Conflict: Migrant Voices and Living Legacies of World War One. AHRC (13.09.2017 - 31.12.2017) GBP16,829

4. Details of the impact

Historically, the topic of language generally, and of the minority languages (Irish and Ulster-Scots in particular) is a vested one in Northern Ireland. Legacy left by the conflicts and by the social and political processes of the past (e.g., The Troubles; the Good Friday Agreement) can obstruct and

hinder any constructive development of such issues with members of the general public, various communities, social groups and cultural organisations, as well as government stakeholders. Notwithstanding these social and cultural barriers, the Ulster team succeeded in achieving impact during the census period in the six key areas listed below.

I1: Influencing government policy on language of indigenous communities

The leading all-Ireland democratic NGO for the Irish-speaking community (Conradh na Gaeilge) has confirmed that Ulster research (R1-4) has directly informed its strategic direction from 2013 to 2020, notably influencing the policy change adopted by the NI Assembly's New Decade, New Approach programme for NI government.

"The research and advocacy work of Comer has had a significant and vital impact on the establishment of the provisions for the Irish Language in the New Decade, New Approach deal" (C8). It was instrumental in forming Conradh na Gaeilge's "advocacy policy in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and has ultimately led to significant policy changes at local government and national level" (C1). Comer's leadership of the Conradh na Gaeilge and input into the development of discussion documents and working papers led to:

- *"the creation of the post of an Irish Language Commissioner;*
- *the provision of the official recognition of the status of the Irish language in Northern Ireland;*
- *the repeal of the Administration of Justice (Language) Act (Ireland) 1737;*
- *the creation and implementation of best practice standards for the use of the Irish language by public authorities;*
- *the creation of an Irish Language translation hub;*
- *support for the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund (ILBF)" (C1)*

Active engagement with civic and political representatives led to public consultation with the following results: 13,000 responses - the highest level of response from NI community on the issue of Irish language compared with other initiatives recording the public perception of the Irish Language in the past: 94% strongly in favour of the Irish language official status. Ulster researchers have continually advocated for best practice policy development collaborating with statutory bodies, government officials and elected Members of the NI Assembly (Department of Culture, Department of Education, Minister for Culture, Minister for Finance, Minister for Education). Following the NI Executive collapse in 2017 and its subsequent reformation as a result of the international treaty signed by two governments and major political parties in NI, concrete pathways for the establishment of Irish language legislation was realised. Ulster initiated effective brokerage of this major step forward in Irish language policy development. Brought forward by DCAL (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure; Department for Communities) in 2015, the draft Irish Language Bill was developed in consultation with Comer between 2017 and 2020 (C8).

Mounting significant pressure on the NI government, and equally shifting the public opinion on the dependence between NI's economic growth and the status of the language so that more positive thinking in relation to Irish was achieved, the support for the Irish Language Act and the establishment of the Irish Language Commissioner grew from 40% in 2016 to 51% in 2018 and was at 58% in 2020 (C5). Public opinion agreeing that support for the Irish language should be provided by the government shifted from 47% in 2015 to 48% in 2018 and grew to 54% in 2020 (C5). A similar shift in public opinion was registered in relation to bilingual signage, which was at 37% in 2017 and rose to 46% in 2020 (C5).

From January 2017 until the establishment of the New Decade, New Approach in January 2020, Comer led approximately 40 delegations from Conradh na Gaeilge to meet with the leadership of the main political parties in NI and the Republic of Ireland to present the case for Irish language legislation in Northern Ireland. These included presentations to the leadership of the DUP and First Minister (27/04/2017); the leadership of Sinn Féin and the Deputy First Minister, (03/04/2017); the UUP leadership (10/08/2017), the SDLP leadership (06/04/2017) and the Alliance Party leadership (24/01/2018). Comer also led representations to the Irish Government, with Irish Prime Minister (Taoiseach) (25/06/2018, Dáil Éireann) and Deputy Prime Minister

(Tanáiste) (12/12/2019) and presented to successive British Secretaries of State (01/02/2018 and 05/01/2019) and to the Head of the Civil Service (21/06/2018) and especially on 20 Jan 2020 when the New Decade, New Approach government programme to restore the NI Executive was finalised between the UK and ROI governments.

In 2017 alone, Comer featured in 78 invited appearances in media outlets, including national newspapers (among others, Irish Independent, 20/10; Irish Times 22/07; Belfast Telegraph 02/11), radio programmes (BBC News, 14/01, 03/03; Irish National broadcasters – RTÉ News 10/03 and Radió na Gaeltachta 03/03; 17/11), blogs and podcasts. Comer's research directly influenced the creation and the rolling out of the Irish Language Translation Hub which has been established within the NI Assembly as of 2021 and he has been appointed to form and lead an advisory group to establish linguistic standards within the NI Assembly.

I2: Driving the change of local council policies for minority languages

As a result of Comer and McDermott's research (**R1, R2, R3, R4**) on connection between international law and local practice, we directly impacted on strengthening the rights of linguistic communities. This research informed key aspects of Conradh na Gaeilge's successful legal challenge against Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council to remove its single language policy (**C3**). Legal firm KRW Law, representing Conradh na Gaeilge, began judicial review proceedings following the Council's introduction of a ban on bilingual street signs in 2018. The challenge was that the Council was discriminating on the grounds of religion, political opinion and cultural identity. KRW Law "referred extensively" (**C3**) to Comer's report (**R1**) in preparation for the case. The result was that "the Council had to rescind their planned implementation of a single language policy" (**C3**). The solicitor involved in the case stated that **R1** is "now considered as the main source of research into the legal framework and requirement of bilingual place-naming policy in NI" (**C3**).

I3: Enhancing community relations through language

Comer and McDermott have worked with language advocacy agencies to nurture positive attitudes toward Irish such as the Irish language cultural centre (Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin Irish language cultural centre, Derry) and the Irish language heritage project in East Belfast (Turas) (**C4**). Outreach events introduced political and community representatives from the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist populations to our international research on language rights (**R1-R3**). In 2017, Ulster led the community relations initiative entitled 'Our Shared Language/Ár dTeanga Chomhroinnte' funded by NI Executive Office (Good Relations) in collaboration with Conradh na Gaeilge (**C1**). Ulster researchers developed a handbook for the project which was disseminated to 1,000 participants, highlighting common areas of heritage (topography, shared names, genealogical history) and was adopted by 40 state schools not traditionally associated with the Irish language.

I4: Informing policy provision for Irish speakers

Ulster's research (**R3; R4**) on policy for minority languages stipulates language planning on an all-island basis, as established under the 1998 Belfast Agreement. Our research informed Government policy in the Republic of Ireland (the Department of the Prime Minister and the Office of the President). Seminars in the Gaeltacht (native Irish-speaking areas) informed the government of the linguistic crisis in rural Ireland for Irish, and influenced budgetary announcements by the Irish government (**C9**): e.g., the 2021 budget had the biggest year on year increase for funding for The Gaeltacht Authority (Udarás na Gaeltachta, from EUR10,000,000 in 2020 year budget to EUR14,500,000 in 2021 year budget, announced 13.10.2020) since its foundation and an increase of EUR1,300,000 in funding for Foras na Gaeilge and The Board of Ulster-Scots for 2021 (announced 13.10.2020).

I5: Enhancing understanding of the benefit of bilingualism to communities, policy makers, practitioners

R2 highlights the benefits of multilingualism to individuals, communities, speech and language therapists, policy makers and NGOs by normalizing the idea of multilingualism.

This knowledge has been used to inform talks and workshops to local and EU as well as

migrant non-EU parents, including Black Asian Minority Ethnic refugee multilingual speakers, educators, speech and language therapists, and schoolchildren. The North West Migrants Forum (NWMF) Programmes Director stated that “*recommendations from this research have clearly resulted in positive change to the ways in which our members use their languages publicly, pass on their language to their children*” and has led to migrants “... *valuing their own language skills*”. NWMF designed “*several projects that promote minority languages in public spaces*” and developed its linguistic intervention plan based on McDermott’s recommendations regarding the provision of a sense of safety for multilingual speakers. It also played “*a key role in the development of the NWMF community hub which provided a much-needed safe space for members and service users to meet and speak / teach their children their indigenous languages*”. McDermott’s **R2** was included in the Forum’s successful funding application to the National Lottery Community Fund for GBP500,000 to support social and linguistic and cultural needs of its members. NWMF developed a series of events and workshops based on **R2**, which has helped promote and sustain minority languages. “*Every year we witness members, young and old, building confidence in using their own languages at these events; a strong indication that they no longer feel the need to hide their languages for fear of discrimination*” (**C7**).

I6: Reducing the academic attainment gap of young multilingual speakers leading to their increased integration

Language Made Fun (LMF) was established in 2013 as a collaborative project between Barnardo’s NI Family Learning and Integration Project (FLIP) service and Ulster. It is a play-based intervention to support the language development of multilingual migrant children in NI, for whom English is not their first language, while promoting the maintenance of their home language in a one-to-one setting (**R6**). The programme is part of a wider Big Lottery-funded Family Learning Integration Hub which saw Ulster collaborate with Barnardo’s and Belfast Fane Street and Holy Rosary primary schools. These schools report record numbers of Newcomer pupils (a pupil who has enrolled in a school but who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher); Fane Street: 80% and Holy Rosary approx. 50%, and were enthusiastic to take part in a project that would be tailored to the needs of these children. LMF assisted migrant children (their first languages ranging from Sudanese and Syrian Arabic, Romani and Hungarian, to Polish, Mandarin Chinese, Mexican Spanish and Farsi) with their English language skills through play. LMF has assisted over 40 Newcomers in Northern Ireland. During the project, Ulster Centre of Multilingualism (UCoM) was asked to develop a group play-based intervention, Language Together, to assist children who could not commit to the intensity of a one-to-one programme but needed urgent language support. Through Language Together, UCoM has assisted a further 30 pupils. The Barnardo’s LMF report (**C2**) shows that 22 children (out of 35) who took part in the quantitative analysis benefitted substantially from their participation. They improved their linguistic ability (sentence structure, word structure, understanding and expressive vocabulary), confirmed by their scores using standardised language assessment tools. Their overall confidence and participation in class activities equally improved as evidenced by the schools’ feedback. **C2** and **C6** confirm that other stakeholders (teachers, vice-principals, parents) have also benefitted.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- C1.** Testimonial from The Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge).
- C2.** FLIP/UCoM report on Language Made Fun (video).
- C3.** Testimonial from KRW legal team that challenged the Newtownabbey Council.
- C4.** Testimonial from East Belfast mission (Turas) project manager.
- C5.** Conradh na Gaeilge reports on the change of attitude to Irish language across the island of Ireland.
- C6.** Barnardo’s report on the Language Made Fun impact.
- C7.** Testimonial from North West Migrant’s Forum.
- C8.** Testimonial from the Deputy First Minister, Northern Ireland.
- C9.** Testimonial from Director of Irish, Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, The Government of Ireland.