

Impact Case Study

UoA 28B: Modern Languages and Linguistics

From local dialects to global languages: supporting multilingualism in Northern Ireland

This impact case study is built on three interconnected strands of research. One focus of research in linguistics at Ulster has been on language structure and use in the local context. Henry (1995) presents the first serious study of Belfast English and confirms that local varieties are as much rule-governed as standard varieties and that their status should be the same as that of standard varieties. A particular consequence of this result is that the users of local varieties should not be discriminated against in education, employment and other areas. A second area of research has been the acquisition of Irish in Irish-medium schools (Henry & Tangney 2001; Henry et al. 2002). This has shown that although at certain stages the Irish developed by children in the immersion situation manifests some errors compared to textbook Irish, it is similar to native-speaker Irish, maturing into a mostly native-like variety. Finally, Folli, Henry and Sevdali have led a three-year longitudinal study of multilingual acquisition (Devlin et al. 2012, 2013). This study has shown that multilingual acquisition exhibits some features of language transfer. However, contrary to standard assumptions, the impact is not straightforwardly in the direction of the stronger language affecting the weaker language(s). This naturally leads to a reconsideration of traditional views on the relationships between languages in the multilingual mind.

The case study shows that these pieces of research have had a direct impact on:

- 1) **public policy and provision for Ulster Scots** for example through staff appointment to The Ulster Scots Academy Implementation Group, planning for an Ulster Scots Academy and publication of Ulster Scots language resources;
- 2) **the shaping of public values and discourse** relating to local dialects with consequent effects on educational participation and practice for example through collaboration with the Ullans Academy, which supports local language varieties;
- 3) **the developments in policy and training** in Irish-medium education for example through the use of this research in the development of an NVQ for early years teachers and other nursery staff;
- 4) **the perspectives of communities and professionals** adapting to the transition of Northern Ireland to a multicultural, multilingual society through the work of UCoM with parents, community groups and various professionals.

In summary, this case study shows how the work of linguistics at Ulster is transforming attitudes and practices relating to language and the status of dialect among relevant professionals. It also importantly empowers local multilingual families in their institutional interactions.