

Bryn Mawr College

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

German Faculty Research and Scholarship

German

3-1999

Review of *Language Policy and Social Reproduction: Ireland 1893-1993*, by Padraig Ó Riagáin

Nancy C. Dorian
Bryn Mawr College

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/german_pubs



Part of the [Linguistics Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Citation

Dorian, Nancy C. Review of *Language Policy and Social Reproduction: Ireland 1893-1993*, by Padraig Ó Riagáin. *Language in Society* 28, no. 1 (1999): 127-130.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
https://repository.brynmawr.edu/german_pubs/7

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

REVIEWS

REFERENCES

- Blommaert, Jan (1996). Language planning as a discourse on language and society: The linguistic ideology of a scholarly tradition. *Language Problems & Language Planning* 20:199–222.
- Heller, Monica (1994). *Crosswords: Language, education and ethnicity in French Ontario*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Pauwels, Anne (1996). Language policy and linguistic minorities in multicultural Australia: Current directions. In Jan Blommaert (ed.), *The politics of multilingualism and language planning*, 40–51. Antwerp: UIA-GER.
- Silverstein, Michael (1996). Monoglot “standard” in America: Standardization and metaphors of linguistic hegemony. In Don Brenneis & Ronald S. Macaulay (eds.), *The matrix of language: Contemporary linguistic anthropology*, 284–306. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Webb, Victor (1995), ed. *Language in South Africa: An input into language planning for a post-apartheid South Africa*. Pretoria: LICCA South Africa.

(Received 19 September 1997)

PADRAIG Ó RIAGÁIN, *Language policy and social reproduction: Ireland 1893–1993*. (Oxford studies in language contact.) Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. Pp. xi, 297. Hb £42.50, \$80.00.

Reviewed by NANCY C. DORIAN
Depts. of German and Anthropology, Bryn Mawr College
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010
dorian@henry.bowdoin.edu

Ó Riagáin has produced the sort of book that many have wished for but doubted they would see: a scrupulously dispassionate, comprehensive account of Irish language fortunes since the late 19th century, and of Irish language policies and outcomes since independence in 1922. Reading his careful, low-key book, one could easily forget that he is writing from and about a country where language issues rouse strong feelings, and also about the single most discussed case of attempted language maintenance and restoration in our time. His meticulous study allows efforts on behalf of Irish to be seen, appropriately, within a broad general framework of national development, in which the effectiveness of language policies is dependent in good part on their fit or lack of fit with the economic and social conditions of a given period.

Readers with an interest in language planning and in minority-language maintenance and revitalization will be greatly in Ó Riagáin's debt. He has rescued the Irish language from its uncomfortable position as the paradigmatic case for determining whether “language revival” can ever succeed, placing Irish language policies instead in a social and historical context peculiar to one small and peripheral European nation emerging from a colonial past in the early 20th century.

At the time of independence, Ireland was still predominantly rural and agricultural. Government economic policy between 1922 and 1960 was aimed at strengthening the agricultural sector rather than at altering the country's economic underpinnings. Since most native speakers of Irish were to be found in the

poorest reaches of the agricultural sector, the government hoped by supporting agriculture to support Irish as well. Introducing Irish into the schools and providing state services in Irish were likewise policies intended to support the existing Irish-speaking population, while training teachers and civil service employees to be Irish speakers was a policy aimed at bringing a middle-class Irish-speaking population into existence. However, state encouragement of agriculture did not produce an upturn in the fortunes of the farming sector. Persistent economic decline in rural Irish-speaking districts produced continuing out-migration, which maintained the attractiveness and utility of English. Still, by requiring Irish as an examination subject in public schooling – and by requiring satisfactory Irish examination results for entry to the national university and to state employment – government language policies “changed the ‘rules’ of the social mobility process” (275), creating an important middle-class sector with at least moderate competence in Irish.

By the early 1960s the need for new economic policies was obvious, in the face of declining viability in the family-farm sector of the economy, out-migration of young people, and low levels of participation in tertiary education. In place of protectionist agricultural policies and concentration on the internal market, Ireland began to develop the export market and small industries. This resulted not only in a decline in emigration and a rise in the proportion of young people in the population, but also in a shift away from agricultural employment to wage employment based on skills and educational qualifications.

In this changing environment, resistance to the linkage between educational success and competence in Irish grew, and in 1973 Irish ceased to be a compulsory examination subject at the conclusion of secondary schooling. Ó Riagáin points out a painful disjunction between economic policy and language policy, first prior to the 1960s and then after the 1970s. In the earlier period, such socio-economic mobility as was available depended on inherited economic capital in the form of family land-holdings or small shops; thus the incentives for Irish built into the educational and government-employment systems affected relatively few young people. By the 1970s a considerably larger number of young people were looking to the educational system and to university training as a means of socio-economic mobility, but the incentives for achieving competence in Irish had been weakened by changes in the language policy. Ó Riagáin’s own research on language-planning outcomes in various parts of the country suggests that government initiatives in economic, social, and regional planning, undertaken independently of language initiatives, probably have more important effects on language patterns than do government language policies themselves. For example, in the Dingle Peninsula, in the Corca Dhuibhne *Gaeltacht* (officially Irish-speaking district) of southwestern Ireland, Ó Riagáin found that the localized social network patterns of the strongly agricultural pre-1960 economy – highly important to maintaining community use of Irish, especially in the traditionally most Irish-speaking western part of the peninsula – have given way to less local-

ized patterns. People in the more rural areas now travel by car to An Daingean, the peninsula's one town, for shopping and for services; children are sent there for secondary schooling, and a certain amount of commuting to work in the town takes place. Increasing rates of in-migration and return-migration produce a higher incidence of marriages to English speakers from other parts of Ireland. The extensive 1983 Irish language survey undertaken in Corca Dhuibhne by the Linguistics Institute of Ireland, where Ó Riagáin is employed, indicated that, while more Irish was being used in An Daingean at that time than had been the case earlier, LESS Irish was being used in homes on the peninsula, particularly in the key western region. Since Corca Dhuibhne homes in which both parents had high ability in Irish produced nearly twice as many high-ability children as homes in which only one parent had high ability, the changing marriage patterns of the region have major implications for social reproduction of Irish.

Ó Riagáin's research uncovers cause for concern about the future prospects for Irish, both in the rural *Gaeltacht* districts and in the city. Irish immersion schooling and an increase in the use of Irish in towns are not an adequate substitute for home transmission of Irish in the countryside, since they are less effective than the family as sources of social reproduction of Irish. In Dublin, where government jobs requiring competence in Irish are disproportionately available, a skewed class-distribution of high ability in Irish puts most such individuals in the upper middle class, and none in the working class. Reflecting this skewing, all-Irish schools have proliferated in Dublin since the 1960s, set up by groups of interested middle-class parents (rather than by state policy, as in the 1930s and 1940s). Linguistics Institute researchers have found that the schools do create networks of Irish-using friends among the families who enroll one or more of their children there. But while recruitment to Irish-speaking networks continues via the all-Irish schools, retention of network members is imperfect, in the absence of a broader Irish-language social environment.

Neither touting the Irish case as a success nor lamenting it as a failure, Ó Riagáin shows the enormous complexity of the social systems in which language policies and practices are embedded; he stresses that language policies "cannot be treated as an autonomous, independent factor" (283). Given the complexity of the social, economic, and political environments involved, he sees no obvious or easy routes to language revitalization. Rather, he concludes that, if language policies are to be effective, they must be devised so as to affect all aspects of national life and must be "sustained for decades, if not forever" (283).

There is a great deal to be learned from this book, and the lessons are mostly sobering. They also have considerable persuasive force because they are based on an enviably large body of data that permits Ó Riagáin to move from one time period to another and from region to region, as well as across a wide range of factors, in considering language outcomes in Ireland. The copious tables and figures are for the most part clear and well placed; they are so informative in and of themselves that the text seems almost to accompany them at some points,

rather than the converse. The reader must keep in mind, however, that the more particular case studies (which are in many respects the most illuminating sections of the book) represent a variety of time periods, and that none of them is very recent. The Galway *Gaeltacht* is looked at in detail for the period 1926–1971 and updated only very sketchily to 1981. For the Corca Dhuibhne *Gaeltacht*, the very fine-grained and rich coverage is for the early 1980s. The survey of Dublin families with children in all-Irish schools was undertaken in 1977. Furthermore, the changing economic and social climate arising from continuing development of the European Community may well produce another transformation that calls for Ó Riagáin to update his book before long. Currently he brings the picture up to date minimally at the book's close, noting that commitment to an Irish television broadcasting station was in place as of 1996 and that the all-Irish school movement has been steadily expanding; but he points out that, at the same time, pupils' avoidance of the Irish examination has been increasing nationally, and that the government continues to relax the curricular requirements for Irish in the schools and the professional requirements for competence in Irish among teachers. Proposals to restructure the National University of Ireland arouse concerns, too, about future adherence to the policy of requiring Irish as a matriculation subject.

Ó Riagáin's focus is firmly on policy and its effects, and his book is largely devoid of people. Actual quotations from survey responses appear only once, in connection with language-attitude questions in the Corca Dhuibhne study (125). A similar sampling of views from the parents who choose to send their children to all-Irish schools in Dublin, and from the children attending such schools, would have been of considerable interest. If there are any effects on language behaviors arising from such insubstantial causes as "the temper of the times," they are not to be found here. But especially in the often overheated Irish context, Ó Riagáin would most likely take this observation as more of a cause for praise than for blame.

(Received 4 November 1997)

AIDAN COVENEY, *Variability in spoken French: A sociolinguistic study of interrogation and negation*. Exeter, UK: Elm Bank, 1996. Pp. 271. Pb £24.99.

Reviewed by WILLIAM J. ASHBY
Dept. of French, University of California
Santa Barbara, CA 93106
ashby@humanitas.ucsb.edu

Originating as a British doctoral dissertation, this work constitutes a meticulous, thoughtful, well-written, and sometimes critical application of variationist methodology to two domains of spoken French syntax: negation and interrogation. The work is of merit not only for the insights it provides into two key areas of French syntax, but also for the more general methodological issues it confronts,