

CELTIC LANGUAGES IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: INTRODUCTION

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The purpose of this issue of *Litteraria Pragensia* is to explore the contemporary relevance of minority languages, especially in relation to literature and culture. The focus is on languages from the Celtic group (Irish, Breton, Welsh, and Scottish Gaelic), all of which have minoritized status in their respective countries. Over the centuries, the traditional argument for the preservation of endangered languages of any kind has been their connection with ethnic or national identity. This idea can be traced back at least to Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) and was a driving force of many revival movements, including those in central Europe and in the Celtic-speaking regions. However, this line of thought has lost some of its relevance in contemporary times. This is partly caused by the changing sociolinguistic situation. In the Celtic-speaking regions at least, the intergenerational transmission of the languages has weakened – in this volume, Nelly Blanchard even mentions the very *end* of intergenerational transmission of Breton – as has the connection of the languages to specific territories. Other patterns of usage have come to the fore, such as the revival of languages via schools in big cities, the growing relevance of universities as sanctuaries for endangered languages, as well as the creation of communities based on networks and various shared interests rather than physical proximity.

All these developments may be seen as a sign of weakness – there is understandable concern that this new usage will amount to a mere ‘disembodied’ or ‘ghostly’ life if the languages lose their geographical foothold. There are ample reasons for continuing the support of, say, the use of Irish in traditional communities in the West of Ireland and the use of Scottish Gaelic in the Hebrides. Yet the non-traditional, novel uses of language are also relevant

and offer new possibilities, new territories, and new life, less connected with the old view of language inseparable from a given nation. Thanks to the availability of various online resources, Celtic languages have attracted learners from all around the globe, some of whom eventually decide to move to the places where the language is still used on a daily basis. Others engage with the language privately, surrounded by a completely different linguistic environment, and use it to communicate with like-minded people online, or to write creatively in it. A scholarly re-evaluation of the theme of minoritized languages is therefore apposite.

This issue offers various perspectives on Celtic languages from a literary or a broadly cultural angle. In their respective ways, all the articles thematize the connection between language and freedom, be it the freedom of the linguistic community/nation in the traditional sense, i.e., achieving self-governance or independence, the freedom of the individual, or artistic freedom. They also look at the phenomenon of translation to and from Celtic languages – as a way of mutual enrichment, but often also as a reflection of power imbalances. Another important theme is the motivation of authors who create literary works in these languages – as they are usually bi- or multilingual, their choice of language amounts to a conscious decision. Are there any advantages to compensate for the obvious disadvantage, i.e., the limitation of audience? The articles in this volume present a number of incentives, from the possibility to create and shape one's own audiences to the perks of escaping the ideological baggage of English.

The opening article by Radvan Markus offers paths for connecting minority languages with various notions of freedom. The nationalist approach to language revival is based on a paradox – while advocating the nation's independence by promoting its language, it strives to limit the freedom of the nation's members by tying them to a specific collective, a specific worldview. From a broader perspective, however, any enhancement of language diversity contributes to the freedom of the individual, by preserving various ways of structuring experience. Language diversity is the perfect antidote against language imperialism, the effort of those in power to control the mind of the citizen through language. After a theoretical exposition, the article traces the themes of personal/artistic freedom and language diversity in Irish-language literature from the beginning of the twentieth century until the present. Out of the themes that resonate in this volume, it notes the way the early authors Pádraic Ó Conaire and Micheál mac Liammóir saw the lack of readership and audience as an opportunity to exercise artistic freedom to the utmost extent, disregarding the demands of the (non-existent) public. Due prominence is also given to Seán Ó Ríordáin's concept of writers' "private languages," jealously protected against the pressures of the multitude, yet able to enrich and

invigorate the broader language they are part of. The article finishes with an analysis of Dave Duggan's recent sci-fi novel *Makaronik*, which takes the relationship between language diversity and freedom as its central theme. Interestingly, in the dystopic future in which the novel is set, all languages are severed from their territory and traditional patterns of transmission. They fight an uneven struggle with Empirish, a language created by those in power in order to coerce and control. The effort to maintain language diversity is seen as a laudable endeavour not only in order to preserve the freedom of choice, but also because of the potential of "small" languages to recreate a feeling of sanctuary, home, and community even in their "disembodied" state.

The more inspiring features of Herder's philosophy of language have been labelled by historian Joep Leerssen as "ecological."¹ Daniela Theinová's article brings the much-needed ecological perspective into the picture, focusing on the theme of language and crisis in contemporary Irish-language poetry. The parallel between ecological concerns and the preservation of minority languages has been made by many, in the Irish context most recently by Michael Cronin in his pamphlet *An Ghaeilge agus an Éiceolaíocht / Irish and Ecology* (2019). Theinová argues, however, that simple "salvage" is not enough, it is equally important to achieve "ecological balance" within the language itself in order to avoid the risks of "self-sufficiency and separation," which would hinder development. The article subtly analyses the work of two contemporary Irish-language poets, Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh and Aifric Mac Aodha, from an eco-critical perspective. It notes the ways the individual poems try to achieve balance through reaching out to other, even more endangered languages (Irrintzina) or sites of ecological catastrophe (Indonesia). Importantly, these poets also make connections with the past by evoking Irish-language and global cultural traditions. This diachronic dimension is important in order to overcome a simplistic concept of crisis, which emphasizes merely the present and the future, and therefore has no place for small languages as relics of the past that hinder communication. Moreover, Aifric Mac Aodha's poems bring the gender issue into the picture, pointing out the various ways that women have been censured and "restrictively labelled" by society and connecting their plight to the larger linguistic and ecological theme. On a more general scale, Theinová's article is an apology of poetry in the face of imminent crisis – she points out that crisis has always been a driving force of poetry and that due to "its capacity to shock language out of smug communicableness," poetry can contribute not merely to preservation, but also to a much needed renewal.

¹ Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006) 99.

Nelly Blanchard's study presents a comprehensive survey of the various efforts to revive the Breton language and literature since 1830. An integral part of her analysis is also an overview of translation practices in the respective periods, as they have often reflected larger trends. Blanchard describes the gradual abandonment of the isolationist and entirely past-oriented approach as it developed in the early years of the revival. Of note is the modernist thrust of the interwar Gwalarn school that, while remaining staunchly nationalist, argued for a future-oriented Breton literature and greater openness to the world. This was also reflected in the effort to translate European masterpieces into Breton. After World War II, the driving ideology shifted more towards anti-colonialism and multiculturalism, positing the Breton struggle as just one facet of the fight for cultural and ecological diversity. Despite these significant developments, Blanchard still recognizes a unity among these movements, which have all stressed the singularity of Breton culture and in various ways, maintained a combative attitude towards France. Even the endorsement of multiculturalism, in her view, did not mean a paradigmatic shift, but rather an opportunity to "reactivate the vocabulary of justice developed around these issues by nationalists in the interwar period" in a different framework. This would imply that the old essentialist language-nation connection, formulated by Herder, still plays a role even in the most modern attempts to defend minority languages. Of special interest is Blanchard's description of the contemporary situation. This is characterized by the view of Breton as an economic asset, featuring prominently in plans for regional development, but also by an anxiety concerning the fate of the language after the demise of intergenerational transmission. One strategy of Breton authors is to translate works from other endangered languages into Breton, creating a "counter-cultural network." However, in light of the rapid decline of the number of hereditary speakers, any Breton literary production nowadays is necessarily an act of hope, "looking ahead to a substantial neo-Breton-speaking readership in the future," which might or might not materialize.

Martina Reiterová's article on discursive strategies employed by Breton revivalists exemplifies the combative nature of Breton literature, as outlined by Blanchard. Using methods of discourse analysis inspired by the work of the French scholar Ruth Amossy, Reiterová seeks to delineate representational strategies employed by revivalist groups at the end of the nineteenth and in the early decades of the twentieth century in order to promote Breton and communicate the necessity to revive the language to audiences in Brittany, France, and beyond. By close-reading little-known and often previously untranslated texts that appeared mostly in the bulletins and almanacs published by *Union régionaliste bretonne*, she identifies five main strategies: the

presentation of the language as a weapon in the struggle for cultural independence, the intentional omission of difficult topics, the emphasis on the allegedly apolitical nature of the revival, the argument of the antiquity of the language, and the role of bilingualism. The scope of the whole issue is broadened to another Celtic region thanks to Reiterová's use of the Welsh revival as a comparative reference which brings to light shared preoccupations, but also contrasts, caused by differences in the historical contexts and in the approach of the British and French state to minority languages on their territory. Welsh materials analysed in the article come mostly from the magazine *WALES*, edited by O.M. Edwards, and *Young Wales*, the official journal of the political movement Cymru Fydd. The overview of discursive strategies identified by Reiterová could be profitably used for analysis of contemporary publications dealing with the revival of Welsh and Breton, inviting observations as to how (and whether at all) have the strategies developed over the last hundred years, and also for research into the presentation of other threatened languages within and beyond the Celtic group.

A number of points mentioned in previous articles are exemplified in the case study by Petra Johana Poncarová which focuses on the Scottish Gaelic activist, publisher, and writer, Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar (1869-1960) and on his vision of drama in Scottish Gaelic. Little research has been devoted to Erskine so far and the article presents the first detailed analysis of his views on Gaelic drama. Like many other revivalists, Erskine saw drama as a major tool for linguistic and cultural revival, and was convinced that its possibilities were insufficiently employed in the Scottish Gaelic movement. He articulated his thoughts on Scottish Gaelic drama extensively in a series of essays published in his own journal, *Guth na Bliadhna*. An erudite and cosmopolitan aristocrat with a decisively elitist taste in art, Erskine sought to combine what he considered the peaks of the Gaelic tradition with contemporary European trends and called for a new, serious, and elevated literature of an uncompromisingly high standard. In recognizing the freedom which a conscious choice to write in a minority language offers to a writer, in focusing on drama, and in the tendency to create new audiences or disregard the public completely, Erskine comes close to the thoughts of mac Liammóir, whose views are discussed in Markus's opening article. Erskine carefully observed developments in Ireland and used Scotland's sister country both as a source of inspiration and a warning. In his shrewd comments on Scottish Gaelic theatre and its business potential, his argument resembles those that call for the use of Breton as an economic asset, as mentioned by Blanchard. Erskine's writing on Scottish Gaelic drama presents a fascinating mixture of eccentricity and outdated essentialist views of language and culture,

and inspiring and surprisingly modern ideas of continuing relevance not only to Gaelic Scotland.

The article by Christopher Whyte brings in an admittedly different, non-academic perspective – that of a practising and award-winning poet who consciously chose to write in Scottish Gaelic, but without the lifestyle that often accompanies such decisions, i.e., settling in one of the remaining communities where the language is still used as a means of everyday communication. For more than thirty years, Whyte’s work has been bringing into Gaelic literature completely new themes and concepts, and making direct connections between Gaelic and other languages, including Hungarian and Russian. To start with, Whyte criticizes the label of “minority languages” as too static a term that does not acknowledge the process that results in the disempowerment of a language, and overlooks the possibility that a language can be both “minoritized” and “majoritized,” sometimes undergoing both processes at once in different places and in relation to different users. With his characteristic cosmopolitan erudition, Whyte combines an honest discussion of his personal choices and experiences with writing in Gaelic from Budapest with references to the works of several other poets, including major figures such as Marina Tsvetaeva, Joseph Brodsky, and Rainer Maria Rilke, all of whom at some point chose or happened to write in minoritized languages. Whyte’s rich and wide-ranging contribution also addresses the questions of audience and translation, criticizing in particular the increasing practice in Anglophone countries of translating from cribs without achieving a command of the original language, which results in an impoverishment of English. As an example, he uses a controversial “translation” of Rilke’s sonnets by the acclaimed Scottish poet Don Paterson. Finally, the article again engages with the notion of freedom in relation to writing in a language that does not surround the author on a daily basis, mentioning some of the unexpected gifts such a seemingly limiting choice may bring.

The final article by Justin Quinn follows a very provocative and inspiring line of argument by reconsidering some of the traditional binaries applied to English and Irish. Many of his thoughts can be related to Christopher Whyte’s observations about the intertwined processes of majoritizing and minoritizing. The minoritizing of Irish has led to a number of interconnected phenomena. The traditional Irish-speaking territories have lost much of their importance, which led to the diminishing of the status of the native speaker. This is deplored by many, as it has led to an impoverishment of the language and its greater dependence on English. Yet, Quinn shows that similar developments have occurred in English as well, once it became the world’s most wide-spread lingua franca. Quinn draws on cutting-edge sociolinguistic research to show that such

global use of English is no mere imperfect learners' use, but constitutes a wholly new linguistic context, largely independent from the traditional English-speaking territory and its culture. English, just as many minority languages, is becoming "disembodied," reterritorialized, and simplified. Interestingly, the processes of minoritization and majoritization have yielded similar results here. In Quinn's view, supported by personal experience, Irish can also function as a lingua franca, connecting individuals from various places in the world. Due to the small number of its speakers, "the sense of belonging and a shared community of practice" offered by such a means of communication is bound to be much stronger than in the case of major world languages, a point dramatized by Dave Duggan in his above-mentioned novel. An interesting aspect of Quinn's article is also its discussion of John Walsh's research of gay "new speakers" of Irish. It is clearly an example of a non-traditional use of Irish, yet it has precedents in figures such as Micheál mac Liammóir, discussed in Markus's study.

As the summaries above indicate, this issue looks at Celtic languages from a number of angles and discusses various attitudes of writers and activists who engage with them. Some of these approaches are more traditional, such as those upheld by the Breton and Welsh revivalists at the turn of the twentieth century. Others offer more contemporary resonances, such as the connection of endangered languages and the climate crisis, and the possibilities of minoritized languages to function as a lingua franca of sorts. Yet the articles also contradict the tradition/innovation dichotomy. As Nelly Blanchard has shown, old nationalist sentiments may also be present in the most modern preservationist discourses. At the same time, many contemporary ideas were already articulated by earlier revivalist figures such as Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar or Micheál mac Liammóir. In general, this volume is marked by an effort to loosen the grip of the essentialist nation-language connection and imagine new contexts in which languages could possibly thrive. We hope that this volume will contribute to a wider appreciation of Celtic and other minoritized languages as a source enhancing cultural and ecological diversity, artistic expression, international communication, and human freedom in general.