

The contested politics and borders of language and identity in Northern Ireland

Anthony Soares

Director, Centre for Cross Border Studies



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Partition

- Partition of the island of Ireland in 1921 creates a border demarcating sovereignty, separating the new Irish Free State from Northern Ireland, which would remain part of the United Kingdom.
- The new border cut across and divided cultures and identities.
- The new border also cut across the territory of the Irish language
- The position of Ulster Scots within the newly created Northern Ireland cements perceptions of its cultural alignment with one “community” (a Protestant, unionist community), with Irish in Northern Ireland being increasingly perceived as the preserve of the “other” community (a Catholic, nationalist community) – a community seen by the other community as against the very existence of Northern Ireland.
- These perceptions deny linguistic realities, not least the crucial role of Protestants in reviving the Irish language.



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What do I call “this place”?

- Northern Ireland
- The North of Ireland
- Ireland
- The Republic of Ireland
- The mainland
- The conflicting views on the legitimacy of the border, which led to the three decades of what became known as “the troubles”, means that the way we choose to name a place can be seen as denying its legitimacy and undermining the identity of one or other community.



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The 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

- Constitutional status of Northern Ireland: “while a substantial section of the people in Northern Ireland share the legitimate wish of a majority of the people of the island of Ireland for a united Ireland, the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, freely exercised and legitimate, is to maintain the Union and, accordingly, that Northern Ireland’s status as part of the United Kingdom reflects and relies upon that wish; and that it would be wrong to make any change in the status of Northern Ireland save with the consent of a majority of its people”.
- Identity (British/Irish): “recognise the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland”.
- Culture and language (The Language Body and its two constituent agencies: The Ulster Scots Agency, and Foras na Gaeilge)



Implementing the Good Friday Agreement: Culture, identity and language

- *New Decade, New Approach* (January 2020):
- “The parties affirm the need to **respect the freedom of all persons in Northern Ireland to choose, affirm, maintain and develop their national and cultural identity** and to celebrate and express that identity in a manner which takes into account the sensitivities of those with different national or cultural identities and respects the rule of law. They also affirm the need to **encourage and promote reconciliation, tolerance and meaningful dialogue** between those of different national and cultural identities in Northern Ireland with a view to promoting **parity of esteem, mutual respect, understanding and cooperation** . These principles will be reflected in legislation”.



The (absence of) an Irish Language Act

- While there was a campaign to create an Irish Language Act in Northern Ireland, the 2020 *New Decade, New Approach* agreement included commitments to the Irish language and Ulster Scots:
- “Legislation to create a Commissioner to recognise, support, protect and enhance the development of the Irish language in Northern Ireland and to provide official recognition of the status of the Irish Language in Northern Ireland. The legislation will also repeal the Administration of Justice (Language) Act (Ireland) 1737.
- “Legislation to create a further such Commissioner to enhance and develop the language, arts and literature associated with the Ulster Scots / Ulster British tradition and to provide official recognition of the status of the Ulster Scots language in Northern Ireland”.



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Brexit and the resurrection of borders

- Citizenship and diverging rights: British versus Irish (therefore EU) citizenship
- A land border or a sea border: the undermining of identities
- The constitutional future of Northern Ireland