

The Contested Politics and Borders of Language and Identity in Northern Ireland

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I would like to speak to you briefly regarding the issue of the contested politics and borders of language and identity in Northern Ireland. I am the Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, which is based in Armagh, Northern Ireland, close to the border with the Republic of Ireland. It is important to just remind ourselves of the geography because I will be speaking about places in terms of the idea of contested politics and borders.

Borders and language

We are remembering the centenary since the Irish War of Independence led to the partition of the island of Ireland in 1921 – exactly 100 years ago – which created a border that demarcated sovereignty; a new border that separated the new Irish Free State from Northern Ireland, which would remain a part of the United Kingdom. It was a new border that cut across and divided existing cultures and identities, and also led to the production of new and often conflicting identity and cultural arrangements.

This new border also cut across the territory that the Irish language inhabited. It separated and created a division around language. But it wasn't just the Irish language, it also created a border across another language that is often forgotten, one that is spoken on the island of Ireland, namely Ulster Scots. This language is spoken not only in Northern Ireland but also across the border in Donegal, or, at least, was spoken.

This new border meant that this other language, Ulster Scots, was now positioned within a newly created Northern Ireland – this new separate jurisdiction on the island of Ireland – and this cemented perceptions of Ulster Scots, of its cultural alignment, with one specific community: a Protestant, Unionist community. Thus one can see a language being assigned to one community, with the Irish language in Northern Ireland becoming increasingly perceived as the preserve of, and as belonging to, the other community, one which is predominantly Catholic and Irish Nationalist. And this community is seen by the other, the Protestant Unionist community, as one that is against the very existence of Northern Ireland. Thus language, a particular language, becomes identified with a particular community and then has a particular political vision assigned to it.

But these are just perceptions people have of a language and which deny the reality, not least, for example, the crucial role that Protestants played in reviving and protecting the Irish language. So you have a language that's normally assumed to be spoken by or the preserve of one community, whereas the other community was actually essential in reviving and protecting that language.

The conflicting views of the legitimacy of the border – its very existence and which led eventually to three decades of what became known as 'The Troubles' – means that the way in which we choose to name a place can be seen as denying its legitimacy and undermining the identity of one or other communities. For example, we can speak of 'Northern Ireland', while some people refer to it as the 'North of Ireland', or simply 'The North' and by using such descriptions, it is very often seen by the Protestant or Unionist community in Northern Ireland, as using a language, a name, that denies the very existence, the very legitimacy of Northern Ireland. And it works the other way. For instance, sometimes people will refer to 'Ireland' or the 'Republic of Ireland' or the 'Free State' in order to

differentiate the Republic of Ireland from Northern Ireland. And sometimes language is even used to position the island of Ireland in terms of England, Scotland and Wales. Thus, some people will refer to England Scotland and Wales or Great Britain as 'The Mainland', and for an Irish Nationalist living in Northern Ireland, to call Great Britain 'The Mainland' can be seen as offensive, as in 'how is that the mainland? We are an island; this is our mainland, not Great Britain.' So as you can see, here you have some very live examples of the use of language in Northern Ireland and the kind of political assumptions that are made around that language.

The Good Friday Agreement, Identity and the Place of Northern Ireland

I would like to skip ahead slightly to 1998 and the end of the troubles, the conflict that killed thousands of people and injured many more. The end of the conflict came about with the signing, in 1998, of the Good Friday Agreement, but which is also called the Belfast Agreement by certain others. So, even with this peace agreement, what you call it identifies which community you might belong to in Northern Ireland, i.e. the Good Friday Agreement or Belfast Agreement depending on which community that you come from. And just to remind you, this agreement, which brought an end to the conflict, also established a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland and sets up a range of institutions. But in terms of identity, and identity and language and landscape, I would like to just highlight three things from that 1998 Agreement.

The 1998 Agreement, which the parties signed up to, talks about the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and about Northern Ireland's place is and where it belongs. And I would like to quote directly from that 1998 Agreement which brought an end to the conflict and which has organised politics since then. With regard to Northern Ireland's place, "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 the majority of its people." Therefore Northern Ireland remains a part of the United Kingdom until a majority of the people decide otherwise.

However, the agreement is not just about the constitutional position of Northern Ireland; it also has a lot to say about identity. In terms of identity, the parties to the agreement, and here I again quote directly from the Agreement, "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 their right to hold British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both governments and would not be effected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland." Therefore, according to the Good Friday Agreement, if you are in Northern Ireland, if you were born in Northern Ireland, you can identify yourself as British or as Irish or as both and you must be accepted as such. But the Agreement also talks specifically about culture and language which concerns the respect for and non-discrimination against other cultures and languages, and the protection and promotion of cultures and languages. And again, the Agreement says specifically that all the parties to the Agreement, "recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity" and it speaks specifically about the Irish language and Ulster Scots. The Good Friday Agreement also set up a number of bodies, including one called the Language Body, which is actually made up of two agencies: the Ulster Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge, the latter being the agency for the Irish language. So the

Good Friday Agreement mentions culture and language and talks about the importance of languages and protection and promotion of languages.

New Decade, New Approach and the Irish Language Act

Skipping forward once again from 1998 to January 2020, to when a new agreement had to be signed. Many people might remember, in Northern Ireland we had had three years without any government. The previous government had collapsed and a new agreement was required to bring the parties together once again to restore government. This was called the 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement. So, while the Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998, talked about protecting languages, promoting languages, this new agreement in 2020 talked specifically about the parties affirming the need to respect the freedom of all persons in Northern Ireland to choose, affirm, maintain and develop their national and cultural identity. Now, while this is a good thing, it also points to the fact that, in January 2020, we have an agreement that essentially repeats what was said in 1998, which indicates that those things that were in the 1998 Agreement were not fully implemented, and one of those things that perhaps hadn't been fully implemented was around language itself.

For a number of years, there had been a campaign to create an Irish Language Act, a piece of legislation that would legally protect the Irish language and give it parity of esteem. In 2020, the New Decade, New Approach agreement included commitments to the Irish Language and Ulster Scots, one of which was legislating to create a commissioner to recognise, support and protect the Irish language in Northern Ireland. However, it also stated that 'legislation will also repeal the Administration of Justice Language Act Ireland, 1737'. Now, this might seem a little odd: until 2020, until this new agreement, it was forbidden to speak the Irish Language in the courts. So the purpose was to introduce legislation that would allow and give the right for Irish language to be spoken in a court in Northern Ireland. In addition, this agreement also established a commissioner to protect and promote the Ulster Scots language.

Thus, here we have an agreement, in 2020, doing things that really should have been done in 1998. And it is this issue around culture, language, respect, diversity, respecting that diversity, which is contested in Northern Ireland because languages and cultures are ascribed to certain political identities.

Brexit and the resurrection of borders

To come right up to the present day, and we have to mention Brexit. Brexit has just resurrected, or revived, borders, contested politics and contested divisions and I would like to give you a couple of examples of how that has arisen.

I mentioned the 1998 Good Friday Agreement earlier and what it said about citizenship, namely giving the people of Northern Ireland the right to identify themselves as British, or as Irish or as both. Brexit has put a border through that now because, if you want to identify yourself as Irish, as an Irish citizen, it should mean you are also a citizen of the European Union – so what do you do if you're in Northern Ireland and you identify yourself as Irish, how do you assert your European Union rights as a European Union citizen because you describe yourself as Irish? And what does that mean for people who identify themselves as British in Northern Ireland? Imagine you are British while your next door neighbour says he or she is Irish: they might have EU rights that you don't have and yet you live on the same street in

the same place. So, Brexit has created a division around identity, how you identify yourself now and what that actually means.

The whole question of borders – a land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland or, what we seem to have now, a sea border down the Irish Sea – may seem to many outside Ireland as just concerning the movement of goods and trade. However, it is fundamental and it takes us back to the issue of identity: if you are from Northern Ireland and you identify yourself as British, as Unionist, and you see a border appearing down the Irish Sea, it is separating you from what you see as the 'Mainland'. Thus it is a separation, and is seen as almost an assault against your identity. Obviously, the other option of a land border, or a hard border on the island of Ireland, would also be seen as an assault on the identity of those who identify themselves as Irish. Thus, Brexit has really divided us again in terms of a question of identity.

And of course, the Good Friday Agreement talked about the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, its place. Brexit has brought that issue right back into the foreground. We are now talking again about where Northern Ireland belongs. Does it belong with the United Kingdom, or should it belong within a United Ireland? And the whole of this discourse just exacerbates division and we citizens have to live with those divisions, those contradictions and those problems.