

Nótaí Cainte – An Coimisinéir Teanga, Seán Ó Cuirreáin

Bord Seirbhísí Bainistíochta an Rialtais Áitiúil,

Baile Dhún na nGall.....Aoine 28 Márta 2008

A Dhaoine uaisle ar fad.

Tá an áthas orm an deis seo a bheith agam labhairt libh ag comhdháil an lae inniu.

Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabhail le Bord Seirbhísí Bainistíochta an Rialtais Áitiúil, agus go háirithe le Fochoiste Gaeilge an bhoird, as comhdháil an lae inniu a eagrú. Creidim go bhfuil buíochas ar leith tuillte ag an gcathaoirleach Alec Fleming, ag Nora Ambrose agus ag daoine eile nach iad as ucht a gcuid saothair in eagrú na hócáide.

Ba mhaith liom fosta fáilte ar leith a chur roimh na gcuariteoirí atá anseo inar measc go dtí mo chontae féin, Dún na nGall.

I am delighted to be with you this morning and I thank the organisers for their kind invitation to address you.

I have been asked to speak in English for the most part, and I will be happy to take question in either official language, Irish or English a little later.

At the outset, let me take this opportunity to thank local authorities for their efforts to create a place and space for the Irish language in their affairs.

I would like, in particular, to pay tribute to those who have been conscientious over the years in promoting awareness of the Irish language and ensuring the rights of Irish speakers to access services in their language of choice.

All of those who have helped in any way to bring the language in from the margins to the mainstream of public affairs are deserving of our praise and gratitude.

I'd like in this short presentation to give you a brief overview of the role and function of my office, which could be described as having a dual mandate – as a compliance agency in relation to provisions of the Official Languages Act and as an ombudsman service to resolve complaints of non-compliance with the Act or with any other enactment relating to the status or use of Irish. I'd like to say a few words also about the cost of providing services in Irish and about the capacity of public bodies, including local authorities, to provide their services in Irish.

Firstly, I think it is important that I should provide some context for this discussion, by outlining the importance of this project in the overall landscape of the protection and promotion of the Irish language.

The Irish language is, of course, the historic, native language of Ireland – spoken here for 2,000 years. It is the oldest written language in Europe which still survives, in Gaeltacht areas, as a living community language.

The decline of the Irish language here has its roots in the colonisation of this country. However, the establishment of a native government nearly ninety years ago led to Irish being designated the "national language" in the Constitution, as well as becoming a core subject of the school curriculum, and, competence in Irish was necessary for employment in the civil and public service up to the mid-nineteen seventies.

Statistics

But while the constitution designates Irish as the first official language, the statistical position reflects a very different reality indeed. In practically every walk of life the English language is the dominant and all-pervasive language for the vast majority of the people of this country; all in all a most unequal union.

The most recent official figures available – the data from the 2006 census – suggests that out of a population of over 4 million people here in the State 1.66 million people – aged 3 years and over - said they could speak Irish. Obviously not all of the 1.66 million who said they can speak Irish would be fluent – but they have demonstrated that they regard themselves as having Irish.

However, the data also shows that about half a million people use Irish every day. The vast majority of those are within the education system where their use of Irish is limited exclusively to their educational pursuits and not used outside the schoolyard walls.

The number of people who use Irish every single day outside the sphere of education is around 75,000 – a minority certainly, but a significant minority.

That is the statistical template within which we operate but we should not overlook the widespread goodwill and affection for the Irish language amongst a significant proportion of the population.

As official languages recognised in our constitution Irish and English have key roles as core elements of our history and heritage. And Irish in particular, has a very special place: it is of crucial importance to the identity of Irish people and as an element of world heritage.

Global

On a global scale, Irish is by no means unique in being under pressure from the steamroller effect of language globalisation, as lesser used languages are marginalised and in many cases obliterated while more dominant global languages are carried forward with enthusiasm and commitment. For those of us who believe in the importance of the continuation of language diversity, these are indeed challenging times.

Indeed the linguistic picture on a world scale is truly most frightening. The projection by experts that many thousands of languages will become extinct over the next 100 years is indeed an appalling vista.

The total number of languages in existence in the year 2,000 was around 6,800.

That figure will have reduced to 700 languages over the next century.

Linguistic experts would suggest that Irish is one of the 700 languages which has a fighting chance of survival because it satisfies the two criteria suggested for continued existence – it has a significant number of speakers and the support of an independent state.

To the best of my knowledge no sovereign independent state has ever abandoned its native language of its own volition and I firmly believe that it would be unforgivable for us to be the first to do so.

The exclusion of a threatened language from aspects of life, be it in parliamentary affairs, the courts, broadcasting, in local government, or in public affairs generally is a mechanism guaranteed to marginalise that language and make its long-term survival untenable.

It is generally accepted there are two dimensions to the evaluation of language endangerment: the number of speakers of the language and the number and nature of the domains in which the language is used.

A language may be endangered because there are fewer and fewer people who speak it, but may also, or alternatively, be endangered because it is being used for fewer and fewer functions.

Support

As we all know this country has in recent years enjoyed a period of exceptional prosperity and growth. We live in a changing world.

Although our constitution refers to Irish as the first official language and English as a second official language a recent study has shown nearly 200

languages are used here at present. A large increase in immigration has significantly changed our linguistic landscape.

There is, of course, a very substantial level of official support for the language to help us meet the challenges ahead.

As well as having constitutional status, Irish is also recognised as an official language of the European Union since the 1st of January 2007.

The language can be used in either House of the Oireachtas, or before any committee, subcommittee or joint committee of either house. All Acts passed by the Oireachtas are published simultaneously in both official languages.

It can be used in all courts, at all levels and in all court documentation.

It is taught as a core subject in all schools to children from their earliest days until they finish the secondary cycle at around 18 years of age – a total of up to 1,500 hours of tuition over 13 years. The language is taught in Irish universities and third level colleges and in over 50 universities outside of Ireland.

We have a Government Minister and Department with specific responsibility for the language, a state language promotion agency, a full time radio service broadcasting in Irish 24 hours a day 365 days a year, a television service, TG4, with a substantial daily schedule of programmes in Irish, a daily Irish language newspaper as well as a weekly newspaper in Irish. The Official Languages Act places language obligations on 650 different state organisations and agencies.

In an article published a few weeks ago the Taoiseach Bertie Aherne suggested that the most important steps taken to promote the language over the past fifty years were the establishment of Raidió na Gaeltachta and TG4, the enactment of the Official Languages Act and the establishment of Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga, the position of Irish in Northern Ireland recognized in the Good Friday Agreement and the recognition of Irish as a working language of the EU.

Challenge

The challenge is now to build on the infrastructure in place.

No amount of legislation can save a threatened language; quite clearly the Official Languages Act of its own cannot save the Irish language; the Irish Government of its own cannot save the Irish language; the only group that can save the Irish language is the Irish people themselves. However, the State and state organisations, including local authorities

have a central role in the provision of the facilities which can allow the language to survive and flourish.

Proactively informing customers and promoting their services in Irish has been identified by the Taoiseach, in that article I mentioned, as an important factor in advancing bilingualism and he suggested it should be addressed in the second tier of language schemes being prepared.

Office

Let me turn for a moment to the functions of my office – that dual mandate mentioned earlier as a compliance agency and an ombudsman service.

Our objective is to ensure that public bodies, including local authorities comply with their obligations under the Act – be those the direct provisions of the legislation, the new regulations to be made soon in relation to the use of Irish in signage, stationery and pre-recorded public announcement, or in the specific commitments made by each individual authority in their own statutory language schemes.

The ombudsman service we provide is focused not just on resolving single issues of complaint but on helping establish better practice in a more generic way and on helping create that vital place and space for the language in public affairs.

I want to make it crystal clear to you that my office seeks to build a relationship with all local authorities and to progress in a spirit of partnership and cooperation wherever possible.

One of our functions is to provide advice to public bodies on their obligations under the Official Languages Act and I want to assure you that in relation to that provision, we are very much “open for business” and will deal honestly and speedily with all queries.

There is no doubt in my mind that there is a widespread belief amongst many Irish speakers, in the Gaeltacht and elsewhere, that English is the default language of the civil and public sector. Unless Irish language services are provided openly and, even proactively, Irish speakers feel that they get better service by leaving their language rights and choices aside. Overcoming that hurdle will take time and effort.

We need to ask ourselves why some many Gaeltacht people who would deal in Irish with RnaG, TG4, Údarás na Gaeltachta, the Department of the Gaeltacht etc, would turn to English, nearly automatically, when seeking planning permission or applying for car tax from a local authority, or dealing with health, social welfare or taxation issues.

In relation to health, a recent independent survey in the Gaeltacht conducted by Ipsos Mori on behalf of the HSE showed that 97% of people surveyed felt that HSE customers ought to have the option of receiving services in their language of choice, Irish or English and, even more significantly, 75% said they could explain their symptoms better in Irish than in English. There is every reason to believe that the same would apply if they were dealing with Gardaí, revenue, or indeed local authority planning official.

Changing the perception that the default language setting is invariably English will not be easy. That perception is compounded, for example, by situations such as the requirement by local authorities, with only some exceptions, that voters outside the Gaeltacht could only be included on the election register using addresses in English.

Another example, this time within the Gaeltacht, arises where Irish language conditions are attached to planning permissions for housing estates. It would appear that some local authorities have, to date, failed to implement these conditions in a meaningful way.

Costs

Some of you, no doubt, will be concerned with the cost of providing services in Irish. In the same way as compliance with other elements of corporate governance costs money, there are costs involved here too.

Yes, there is absolutely no doubt that there are additional costs involved with the provision of services bilingually rather than in one language only.

The costs however need not be huge in the context of overall administrative budgets and prudent planning and cooperation can help keep them in check.

I want to emphasise again that not all publications by public bodies are required to be published simultaneously in both official languages by this legislation.

There is a myth that every scrap of paper emanating from public bodies must be bilingual. I think it was the late John F. Kennedy who said that - *“The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie -- deliberate, contrived and dishonest -- but the myth -- persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.”*

Yes, local authorities are required to publish their public policy proposals such as draft development plans, as well as annual reports and audited financial statements simultaneously in both languages.

These documents are the core publications identified by the Oireachtas in framing the legislation as been the ones which they believed required to be provide in Irish as well as English in order to facilitate language usage in that domain. Other publications in Irish are the ones identified for prioritisation by the individual local authorities in their own language schemes.

Capacity

I want now to turn for a moment to the issue of capacity – the capacity of public bodies to provide services in Irish. It varies enormously, of course, in the same way as the demand for services through Irish varies depending on the interface the particular organisation has with individual Irish speakers or communities of Irish speakers, in the Gaeltacht or elsewhere.

Capacity can only be increased in four ways – at recruitment stage, by upskilling of current staff, by redeployment of Irish speakers to deal with the public or by outsourcing.

Outsourcing is becoming less problematic, I hope, in so far as there is now a panel of 98 accredited translators available whose translations are provided in “guaranteed Irish.” Redeployment of staff is only an option if you have staff with fluent Irish in non-frontline positions who can be transferred.

Upskilling involves helping those who wish to increase their fluency by attending classes or courses. This can be helpful where individuals have an interest in and a commitment to improving their language ability, but it can be very challenging and slow to bear fruit unless significant time, energy and, indirectly, finance, is allocated to it.

I want to take this opportunity to thank those local authorities and their individual staff members who are attending courses or classes and wish them the very best in the efforts and hope that it will be both beneficial and rewarding for them and their organisations. I believe that they will find the language an asset and not a liability.

Recruitment

The most successful and cost effective way of increasing language capacity is to factor it in, at recruitment stage. I gather that this is something that you will be turning to in greater detail this afternoon. I was to say that I am becoming more convinced than ever that more focus ought to be given to attracting and recruiting fluent bilinguals in to the civil and public service. It’s probably the most cost effective method of adding language capacity and will pay dividends over time.

I want to deal with another myth which arises from time to time which says that equality considerations prevents fluency in Irish being made a requirement for a public position. This, I want to assure you, is not the case and I can refer anyone who requires it to the case law on this matter.

Vision

In the face of globalisation and the threat to thousands of lesser-used languages throughout the world, like many others who are concerned about the future of Irish, I often sway between pessimism and optimism.

The negatives include the pressure on the remaining Irish language communities in the Gaeltacht to abandon their own language in favour of English, the absence of fluency of many pupils leaving school after years of studying Irish and the general marginalisation of the language in the life of the nation.

The positives include the increase in the number of people who said in the most recent official census that they could speak Irish, the growth of Irish medium schools, Gaelscoileanna, and the increasing popularity of the Irish language television service, TG4 as well as the provision of additional services through Irish by state organisations, including local authorities, creating a place and space for the language.

A “vision statement” on the future of the language published by the Government in 2006 is to lead soon to a new 20 year strategic plan for the language. That, I believe will be an important and welcome development.

I would reaffirm that the Official Languages Act is a shield not a sword – it protects Irish language rights but does not injure in any way English language rights. And we are talking of rights here – rights not privileges or favours.

The Official Languages Act does not require or compel any individual citizen, or any individual public servant or civil servant to do anything in relation to the Irish language. It does however challenge the management of state organisations, including local authorities, to put systems in place to provide certain basic levels of services through Irish for anyone who wishes to conduct their business through Irish with the State.

The Official Languages Act, to my mind, is a practical and pragmatic piece of legislation which is aimed at increasing the quantity and quality of public sector services through Irish in a gradual and coherent way. It will, through making it useful and functional, make the language more relevant outside the education system. After all, it would appear to be very logical that if the State requires schoolchildren to study Irish for 13 years, then it should at least facilitate them in using that language in dealing with state organisations, afterwards, including local authorities.

The provision of public services for Irish speakers, I would argue, should be seen as a process of normalization which will not detract from the provision of similar services already available without question through English to those who choose that language.

As the Official Languages Act becomes more embedded in the system I hope and believe that it will be shown to prove its worth. Some Irish speakers feel that it does not go far enough, some public bodies no doubt feel it goes too far.

Perhaps, it may have struck the right balance. In thanking you today for what you have already achieved, I would appeal to all of you to ensure your organisations' support for the legislation and its effective implementation.

It is worth recalling now that although TG4 is universally quoted, and rightly so, as an example of positive action in support of the language, that it was not always perceived in that way. One of the country's best known journalists and columnists said in the Sunday Independent – 7 April 1996.

“Telefis (sic) na Gaeilge is a sick, expensive folly. Set up in Galway, staffed by Irish speaking ‘nutters’, to feed fantasies about cultural purity to a constituency that won’t register on the TAMs, this monument to political conceit will cost £20 million A YEAR. Until it is closed.”

TG4 is now credited with forging a new place and space for the language in the world of broadcasting. Ultimately, I believe that the provisions of the Official Languages Act will, in a similar manner, be seen to have heralded a new place and space for the language in the civil and public services of this country. It is, with that in mind, that I appeal to you to ensure your local authority plays its valuable and vital role in bringing our national language from the margins to the mainstream.

Finally, I want to tell you a little story about compliance with the law.

As you are well aware a law banning smoking in places of work including pubs or bars was introduced here some years ago. A number of customers from a pub in the West of Ireland were in court charged with after hours drinking. It appeared that, even when they were served after hours drinks in non-compliance with the licensing law the proprietor insisted that they go outside for a cigarette in compliance with the new “no-smoking” law, which was what led to their arrest by vigilant gardaí. In seeking compliance with the Official Languages Act, we would, in that case, see the no-smoking legislation rather than the licensing legislation as our template!

Glacaim buíochas libh as éisteacht go foighneach liom ar an ócáid seo.