

How long is a piece of string?

Perceptions and attitudes to the Irish language amongst non-traditional learners of Irish in Northern Ireland.

Report compiled by C. McLoughlin on behalf of the Droichead Project in An Gaeláras Ltd.
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An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
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Linda Ervine: Escaping anxiety to find the Irish language

1 January 2020



Linda Ervine works for the east Belfast Irish-language organisation Turas

Linda Ervine is best known as an Irish-language activist working in the

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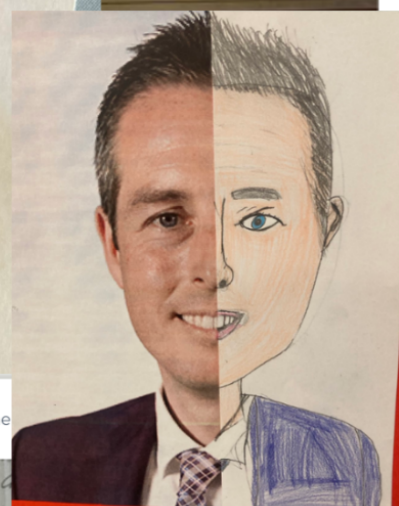
DUP will never agree to Irish language act, says Foster

6 February 2017



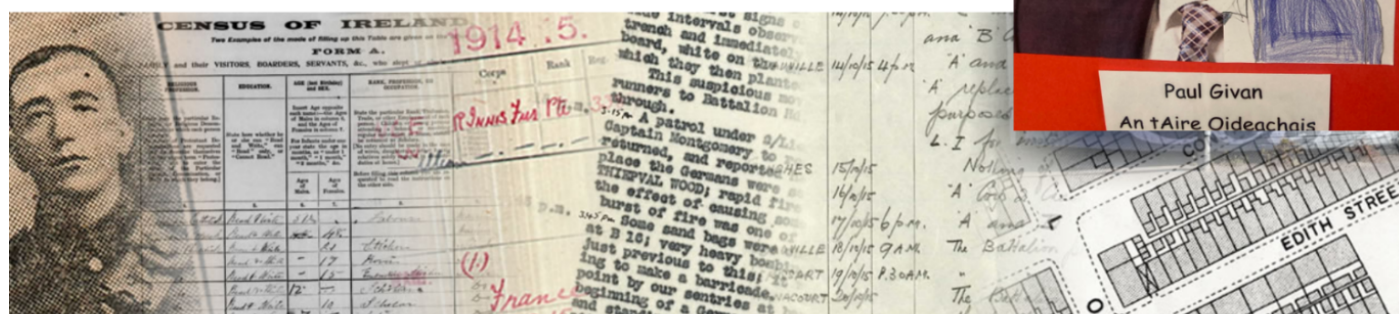
The Irish language can give us all a sense of home - if we save it from sectarianism

Susan McKay



Great War Gaeilgeoirí of East Belfast

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Gaeilgeoirí an Chogaigh Mhóir as Oirthear Bhéal Feirste

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Foreword:

The team at Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin is committed to the development of a bilingual society in the Northwest, with people invested in Irish culture in the broadest sense. We have been teaching Irish in Derry and the surrounding areas for 35 years, and we serve the needs of a community of Irish speakers from those taking their first steps in the language to those living their lives through the language. The Droichead project, through which we teach the language to people who have not had traditional access to the language, is integral to our work, and to the growth of the language in the future. This comprehensive research delves into the perceptions and attitudes towards the Irish language among non-traditional learners and helps us to understand how we can remove the many hoops that people have to jump through in order to access the language. It also directs us both individually and as an organisation, to consider what shifts we need to make in our own mindsets, to make our space, An Cultúrlann, a more welcoming place for people from all backgrounds so that as many people as possible can benefit from connecting with a thriving language community.

Understanding the attitudes of non-traditional learners—those who did not have access to Irish language learning at home, in school, or within their community—is critical in our ability to use the language to build peace in our communities and explore common and often challenging themes that affect us all - climate; class; identity; social issues and peace. Our members come from diverse backgrounds, and their engagement with the language can provide valuable insights into broader social dynamics. This study challenges the often-held view that people from Protestant and/or Unionist backgrounds automatically view the language as divisive; we can see that it highlights a range of genuine feelings, from indifference, curiosity and confusion to support and sometimes, resistance.

This report will be invaluable in guiding us in our work, we welcome the findings and will be looking at the results with a view to consider how we continue to engage with those communities who have had limited or no access to the Irish language

Context

There is a widely accepted and unchallenged narrative that there are people who learn Irish and people who do not.

There is no getting away from the fact that regardless of the findings of this research, the Irish language has proven a contentious issue within the Political environment in Northern Ireland. Indeed, any examination, be it cursory or in depth, of media headlines, articles, interviews, or negotiations around the stop and start nature of the Stormont Executive over the last decade will illustrate just how much language, in this instance the Irish language, can be used as a political tool. ¹ These very public and high-level disagreements exacerbate and entrench the myth that the cultural heritage of the Irish language is not a shared heritage. This misunderstanding promotes division, sectarianism, and prejudice.

Purpose.

This research was commissioned by the staff of the Droichead project to inform their future practice and delivery. Droichead is an innovative, vibrant and unique outreach and good relations programme based at Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin² in Derry-Londonderry. It is the only Irish language outreach programme of its kind in the Northwest region. The name is derived from the Irish word for bridge, ‘Droichead’ and it reflects both the project’s origin and aims. It acts as a bridge that allows conversation and ideas to flow out of and more importantly into the Irish language community that is based in Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin.

¹ Some examples available Appendix.

² Although officially registered as An Gaeláras Ltd, the centre operates and is widely recognized as Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin.

The two people who work on the programme, Lisa Anderson, and Catherine Pollock, both identify as non-traditional learners. This project and their participation in it, is very much a labour of love. Both Lisa and Catherine learned Irish as adults and found a connection that was so important to them that they became enthusiastic advocates for learning. The key element of this was to provide Irish language learning to those who would not have had access to learning, particularly those considered to be from broadly Protestant or Unionist backgrounds. To do so, they run Irish language classes for complete beginners in what might be considered as neutral venues, within a Northern Irish context. They also commission research and resources that investigate challenging narratives to dispel myths, challenge stereotypes and stimulate conversation about Irish and those who speak it or seek to learn it.

Background to the current research.

Droichead began a Waterside Language Initiative in January 2015. They invited Linda Ervine,³ and a group of her learners from the East Belfast Mission to Derry to give a talk at St Columb's Park House in 2014. Following this event, eighteen people who would not have considered attending a traditional class, registered for a pilot Irish course. In the first year, a core group of between 6 and 8 people attended regularly. Since then, numbers attending and interest in the outreach classes has grown year on year. So much so, that the Droichead project now offers four classes and has forty regular learners, sixty percent of whom are from a broadly Unionist background.

The project exists therefore as a direct result of an identified need rather than simply an abstract idea. While its delivery may be due to personal experience its success reflects the fact that the heritage and history of the Irish language belongs to everyone. The project coordinators both believe that inclusion is not just about the ideas that we have around Irish but also the actions that we take in relation to it. If the language belongs to everyone, but classes are made up of people who do not reflect the diversity of our community, then the question of “why?” needs to be asked to ensure that the work to change it is effective and sustainable.

Scope

Defining the subject group:

Who do we mean by ‘non-traditional learners? We use this term because it is the most common way of describing those who have not had access to learning Irish. However, from the outset this research challenged the very idea of non-traditional learners. We are aware that in Northern Ireland, the dominant narrative is that a non-traditional learner is assumed to be someone from a broadly Protestant or Unionist background. However, even a cursory exploration of the history of the Irish language highlights that the language was often not only valued but protected and promoted by those of Protestant and Unionist heritage.⁴ Further to that, the desk research that was carried out before the design of the survey only supported the fact that the history of the Irish language is a shared history. There was no study or text that argued the opposite. Any search that we did to try to find evidence of the contrary, threw up a tiny number of Tweets and Facebook posts. For this reason, we were unwilling to ascribe a definition of what it means to be non-traditional based on community background. Instead, we looked at the situation of a lack of access to Irish language learning and asked those to whom it applied, how would they identify themselves.

To this end, the research defines non-traditional learners as: those who had no access to Irish learning at home, in school or in their community, regardless of community background. As a result, in keeping with the approach used by the Droichead project we employed a self-identification methodology.⁵

³ Linda Ervine is a well-known advocate for learning Irish regardless of community background or political belief. She is also known for being very open about sharing her experience of coming to the language as a ‘non-traditional’ adult learner.

⁴ For a list of suggested resources and suggested reading, please see Annex 1. of this report.

⁵ For further information on this approach, please see ‘Measuring Up: A challenge to government and the voluntary and community sector to better reflect the society in which we live.’ (2019) available at <https://culturann.org/culture/research-and-evaluations>

A note on geographical Scope and terminology.

This research is the result of access and perceptions of the Irish language in a specific geographical area. That is to say that the challenges and barriers that can cause a lack of access Irish language learning, which face Droichead participants, are a direct result of policies and culture specific to Northern Ireland. Within that context there are issues and conflicts that can arise with terminology. For clarification, this research will use reference to the administrative area of Northern Ireland as a political entity and judicial area within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Ireland, when referred to, means the Irish state as a political and judicial entity.

Methodology:

The research explores the question, what are the attitudes of non-traditional learners to the Irish language, using quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This included: an in depth desk based study, to assess the current landscape and what, if any research had been recently carried out; a review of social and print media coverage⁶ - headlines, phrases and images associated with attitudes towards the Irish language by prominent organisations or public figures; one to one interviews and sharing of an anonymous survey⁷ made available both online and in person via a variety of methods included below.⁸

Areas for exploration were divided into three categories with a separate section added for self-identification. The three categories were as follows:

1. General feelings around the language. Gut reactions or emotions that come up in response to the subject in general.
2. Stated opinions. What are the things that we would say or think when asked for opinions or thoughts.
3. Actions that you might consider as a result of feelings and thoughts. For example, attending a talk, learning Irish, opposing signage or the support you might give to funding or legislative proposals.

Schedule of research:

Invitation to participate.

We put out an initial call for individual interviews and focus groups via:

- Local community networks, in the form of community and council bulletins
- Information and requests to partner organisations,
- Shared through the Cultúrlann social media channels.
- Emailed: Church groups and faith-based organisations.
- Non-Christian religious organisations.
- Primary and Secondary schools in Derry City school area.

⁶ We searched for headlines, phrases and images that appeared when the Irish language was mentioned by prominent organisations or politicians whose remit or identity is related to broadly Unionist or Protestant culture or identity. Side note we carried out searches related to Irish language and Migrants/Asylum seekers/ Minority ethnic communities but were not successful in finding resources relating to Northern Ireland, we found some articles or headlines that overlapped.

⁷ Given the sensitivity around any questions relating to culture and identity, we allowed for anonymous responses so that individuals could be comfortable and open in expressing themselves.

⁸ We were also mindful of two relatively recent large-scale studies on the subject[#] and considered how our research might contribute to a wider pool of information and knowledge. Details available in Appendix 1.

- Community and resident associations.
- Thematic interest groups, including those who represent the interest of new migrant groups.
- Women's groups
- Men's sheds,
- Youth groups/clubs
- Ulster Scots language groups.
- Media outlets
- Newspapers
- Radio stations
- Individual media programmes
- Individual correspondents.
- Collective personal and professional contacts within the team - Contacts that are wide and varied.

We had one response for a one-to-one interview.

Without further feedback we cannot, at this stage, give a definitive answer as to why there was such a low response. However, we can consider some of the following reasons: a lack of interest; other priorities; negative political perceptions of the subject/Cultúrlann; a desire to avoid giving offence or to engage in discussion around potential sensitive issues. We repeated requests and sharing but survey engagement was incredibly slow. The lack of response to the survey was concerning, so we decided to extend the availability by another two months. This meant that instead of closing the survey at the end of January 2024 as was originally planned, we closed at the end of March 2024.

Collection of feedback

By the end of March 2024, we had secured five, one to one interviews and seventy-five completed surveys. Unfortunately, we did not find an opportunity to run a focus group. This in spite of the fact that the Droichead project has over a decade of experience in specific outreach work with non-traditional learners, particularly those from broadly Unionist and Protestant backgrounds as well as a network of contacts within the community and voluntary sector.

It is worth noting that as the researcher on this piece of work, with a great deal of experience engaging stakeholders and conducting a wide variety of community-based consultations and conversation, this is the first time that I have experienced such a noticeable or significant lack of engagement on any subject. This is significant because it implies that conversations around the Irish language may still feel like a contentious issue among some parts of the population. It appears that there are still barriers or challenges to engaging in this conversation. Suggesting that there is still work to be done.

I would like to point out, on behalf of those who did offer their time to speak on a one-to-one basis, that none of them wanted to be considered as speaking on behalf of anyone other than themselves. They did not want to represent themselves as a “spokesperson” for a particular group or community. They were all individuals who worked in the community and voluntary sector. They were also without exception, generous with their time and open to sharing their experiences. We would like to extend our thanks and appreciation to them for taking part.

Summary

A broad overview of the research would indicate that in this subject group, positive as opposed to negative attitudes towards the Irish language are more prevalent. Why they have positive feelings or opinions are also varied. Some say that it is a way of understanding their geographical heritage or as a different way to connect with the land around them. There were mentions of a general interest in learning or feelings of curiosity.⁹ A few respondents talked about it as a way of understanding their own and/or other's identity. Some expressed sadness and loss because they didn't have the option to learn it.

Regardless of the frequency and degree of positive responses, it does not remove the clear evidence that some respondents have persistent or strongly held negative feelings and opinions. There were several references to it being used as a political tool as well as some reports that it made people feel excluded in some contexts¹⁰. These sentiments echoed statements that Droichead staff have heard before as well as some headlines that are well known¹¹.

The results validate the increasing awareness that there are many variations of multi-layered identities beyond the traditional binary (and 'other') category that have traditionally been used to understand identity. This correlates with anecdotal evidence gathered over the years by all those who work not only on the Droichead project but those in Cultúrlann who work across the wider Irish language community as well as those in the broader community and voluntary sector.

Assessment:

Attitudes and perceptions do not fit into binary categories. It seems as if the Irish language in Northern Ireland is imbued with a power that other subjects are not. For example, there are those for whom the language is simply not relevant or of interest. One individual commented, in a conversation with the researcher, that they felt they could not just say, "I'm just not interested." They felt that by saying they were not interested; they were looked down on. They had felt that there was an impression given that if you were open to language meant that you were culturally more aware or advanced. Their response was that it was just not important to them. They emphasised that people do not and in fact, could not be open to every cultural or heritage subject. Practically, language therefore cannot be important to everyone, so it could not and should not be seen as a lack of cultural interest or an intellectual failing. In the same vein, another participant mentioned that if someone did not have an interest in commenting on the language for any reason, but if they were openly or perceived to be from a broadly Unionist or Protestant background, there was almost a presumption that a lack of response or engagement implied a negative opinion. They reiterated that again, they did not have any strong feelings either way, they didn't know enough about it. They could see why it was of interest and why it was politicised but they themselves were not interested in a conversation about it. There was a strong sense from those interviewed that there is an assumption that when asked about the Irish language you should have definite positive or negative opinion, when sometimes people have no opinion or are simply not interested. I must admit that this threw a light on an area that had not been discussed much in the development of the survey. It is understandable given that it was commissioned by an organisation that has as a core part of its remit, the promotion of the Irish language but it is something that should be noted as standing out to the researcher. There is a general sense that there is more pressure within a Northern Irish context, to have an opinion on Irish than, if you asked someone in Ireland or another jurisdiction in the United Kingdom. Could this reflect the unique conflation of politics and culture that exist in this Jurisdiction?

⁹ These echo sentiments gathered from Droichead learners in the past. Examples can be found at <https://culturann.org/culture/testimonials>

¹⁰ There were also one or two anecdotal examples of this shared in the one-to-one interviews.

¹¹ Appendix 4 has a list of some headlines that are easily available about the politicisation of the language as well as some high-profile comments on funding or support for language initiatives.

Conclusion

After six months of pondering this question, this researcher is completely comfortable in saying that I do not have an answer. In fact, I would go so far as to say that any researcher or person that claims to have an opinion, outside of their own personal experience should be treated with a healthy dose of scepticism. What is the attitude of non-traditional learners to the Irish language? The answer is, how long is a piece of string? They can be positive, negative, indifferent, or potentially non-existent. Language in public discourse in Northern Ireland is highly politicised but it is not necessarily political for the learner or speaker. There are people and organisations trying to change the narrative, but they have yet to gain widespread influence. Even if there were to be a seismic shift in public discourse, it would not take away from the fact that there will always be people for whom language is not high on the list of day-to-day priorities and others for whom it is a core value and a defining element of their identity. Dominant narratives are just that, narratives, stories to simplify the complex. They are, for the purposes of this report, in no way a guarantee that an individual's identity is a method for predicting their opinions, feelings, or actions around language.

Next steps.

We cannot assume that those from broadly Unionist or Protestant backgrounds do not want access to the language. There is a continuing need to broaden access to the language for new audiences or those who have not had access to language learning in the past.

The responses to the research show clearly that perspectives of and attitudes towards the Irish language amongst those who did not have access to learning it, are diverse and varied. Information gathered through this piece of work indicates that narratives regarding perceived attitudes to the Irish language can and, we would suggest, should be challenged.

Levels of interest are different, and so a broad range of tools and methods need to be available. We need to tailor our approach and continue to work with learners and communities to identify areas and levels of interest.

This research highlights a disconnect between public perceptions and media coverage of attitudes and the day-to-day experience of learners and participants in the Droichead programme. This means that we still need work on how we talk about language within and beyond the Irish language community. Dominant narratives in the public domain perceptions are very strong and pervasive. To address this issue and allow for change, more work needs to be done. It is important to support spaces where creative and innovative approaches can be developed and practised.

Afterword

Lisa Anderson

This piece of research has been very useful and timely given the recent return to Stormont and the posturing around the July elections. The discrepancy between the findings of this report and the perception around an Irish language Act and signage (for example), compared to what is often reported in the media and highlighted by politicians is, I believe, another legacy of the Troubles that impacts the peace process. The Irish language has had strong links with a particular section of the population and with those imprisoned during the Troubles. Every step we make towards a lasting peace involves some level of reconciliation and to some extent, the Irish language is tied up with this, despite the fact that it is an ancient language that existed long before the Troubles and long before much of the disputed history of this land. This can, to some degree, explain the unique pressure people feel when asked about their attitudes or feelings around the language – the question is more than a question about a language, it relates to a history of conflict. What the research appears to show is that a lot of people are willing or have moved on from this association and are seeking a lasting peace and we need to ask whether the media and politicians are responsible for delaying this process.

With regard to the questions on ‘identity’, this is an area of work that the Droichead team have addressed in the past and believe has a role in ‘othering’ communities and exacerbating rather than helping the reconciliation process¹². The community and voluntary sector have repeatedly voiced their dissatisfaction with the use of the existing monitoring tools being used to gather data from participants in peace programmes and have readily admitted that the inconvenience of them has led to guess work on the part of the facilitators in completing them, thus questioning their validity. In addition, this information is sent to funders with no tangible feedback given to those on the ground about the value or use of this data. People are as uniquely different as they are the same and this aspect of the human race is something that should be celebrated and valued and used as a tool to bring them together not to create more division and this is an area that needs to be explored further.

Catherine Pollock

It is important for the work of Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin and, in particular the Droichead Project, to utilise opportunities to research and gain insight into the very perspectives that our work hopes to impact in a positive way. Sincere thanks must go to the Department of Foreign Affairs for recognising the benefits and awarding us the funding that allowed us to produce this piece of work. I would like to commend the detailed and inclusive approach taken by Cara McLoughlin to ensure that the methodology and design of the research aligned with the ethics and philosophy of the Droichead Project, from desk research to questionnaire and one to one interviews. It was reassuring that she instantly understood why we ask questions in certain ways, what we find frustrating and challenging about some of the methods employed in monitoring and evaluation of Good Relations work, and that she referred to our previous research, reports and personal inputs when planning the study.

The results support our long-established view that, within communities described as having a broadly Unionist identity, there are a variety of perceptions and opinions relating to the Irish language and varying levels of interest. It is frustrating that the dominant narrative in local politics and media is that this community feels very negatively and has no interest or personal connection to the language.

There are implications for our work and advocacy. This research provides tangible, concise and accessible information for us to challenge these deeply ingrained misconceptions. It also provides evidence that access to the language is desired by some people in all communities here, at some level. We should therefore be continuing to provide access in welcoming and suitable environments and through a variety of mediums.

Immersive Irish education is growing every year in Northern Ireland. I have two children who attend a Gaelscoil, and I have witnessed first-hand the cognitive and linguistic benefits. It is also a joy to watch and listen as your child becomes proficient in two languages as they grow up. By continuing to acknowledge and accept the disproportionately negative views of the language, the broadly Unionist and Protestant communities could miss all the potential advantages and positive educational outcomes of immersive education.

¹² Research: Diversity Theory and Policy: A Comparative Analysis by Joel M. Brinson 28/4/2017

For policy to be enforceable, diversity must be operationalized in a measurable fashion. This means that diversity programs must put extensive focus on labelling and categorizing cultural, ethnic and religious identities in the interest of ensuring that these labels are all equally represented. This approach, while inevitable, is massively problematic, as it forces employers and employees to ascribe to pre-determined identities. This brings a constructed notion of identity to the forefront of relations in the workplace, which many have argued undermines individuality and promotes stereotyping rather than engaging with individuals (Fein, M. (2000). Race Relations: A Survey of Potential Intervention Strategies. Sociological Practice, 2(3), 147-162. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43735720>)

This study has thrown up many questions I would like to explore further. Why do people feel the way they do? What is there knowledge base? What influences their perceptions? What information, experiences and education might help to change perceptions? I firmly believe that there is huge potential for the Irish language to be a tool for peace. One that helps change minds and foster a sense of belonging to this island we all call home.

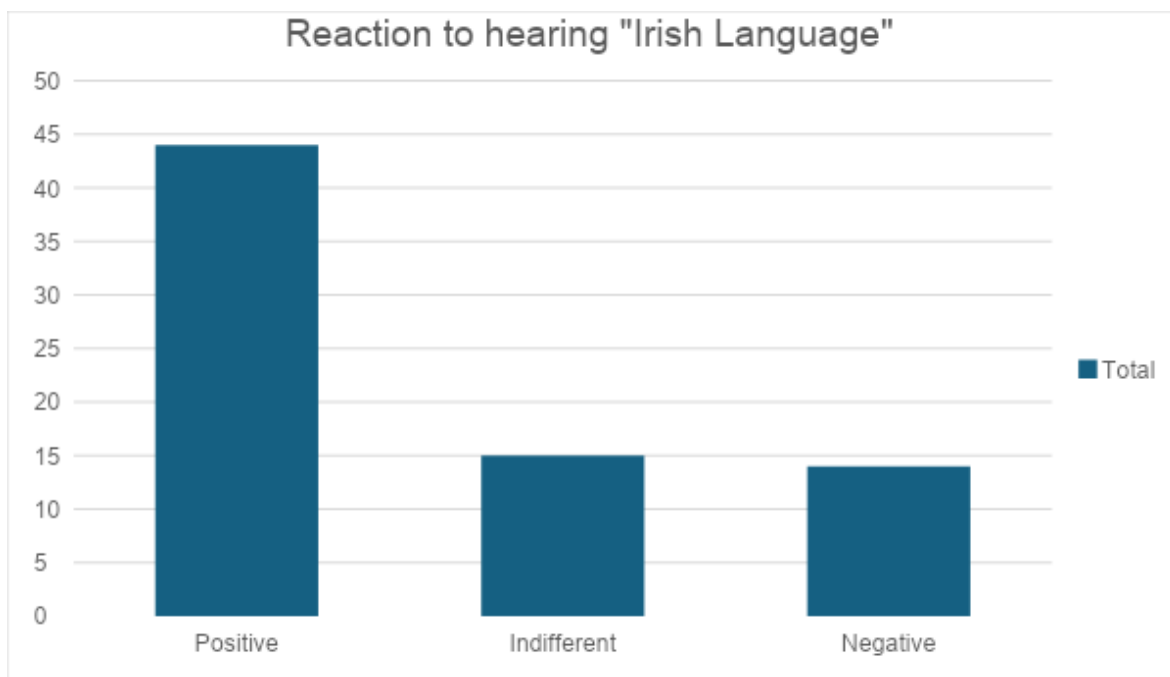
Survey Results

Feelings:

Q.1 Could you share your initial feeling when you hear “Irish Language?”

- The most common response was "Positive," It was selected forty-five out of 75 times.
- The next most common was "Negative" which was selected 14 times.
- "Indifferent,” was selected ten times and was the least common response.

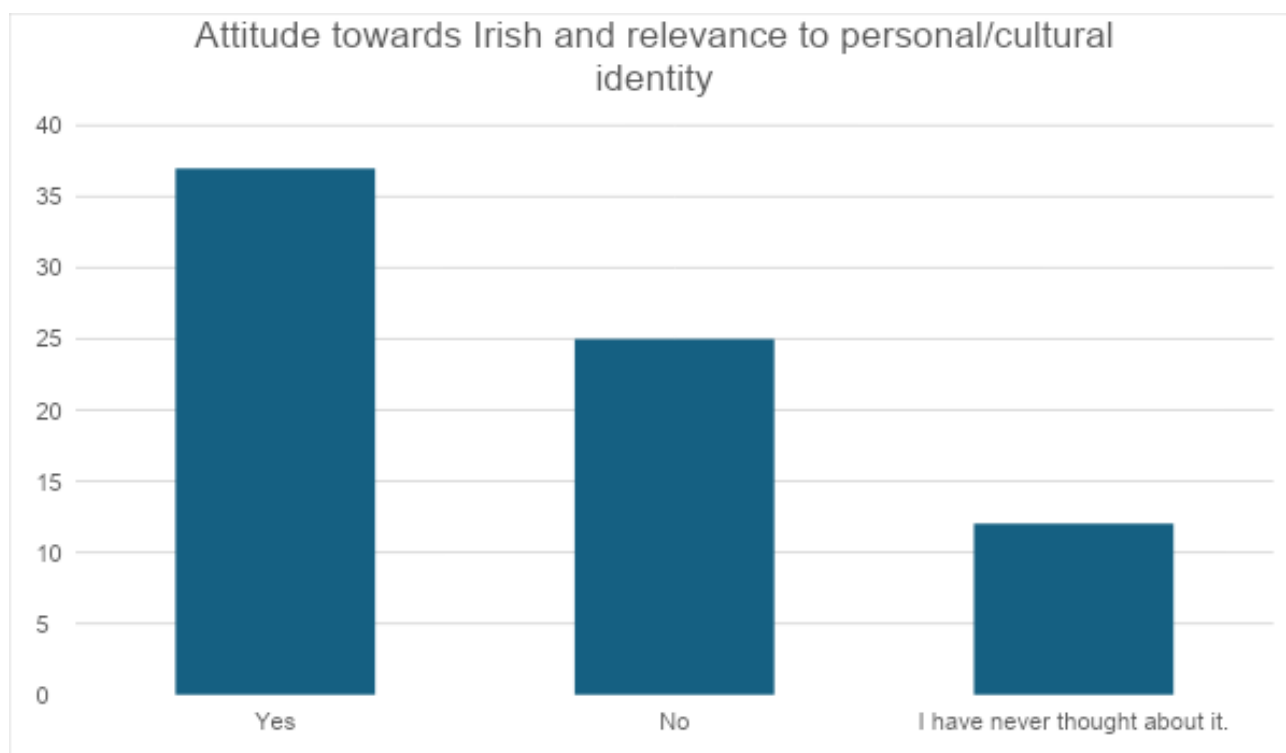
Conclusion, there were more positive than negative feelings among respondents. With yes outweighing no by a considerable margin.



Q.2 Do you think that your attitude to the Irish language plays a role in shaping how you perceive your identity, (personal or cultural)

- "Yes" is the most common response. It was selected 37 times.
- "No" appears 25 times.
- "I have never thought about it." appears 12 times. It is hard to know whether this means that they do not associate language with identity or they have not thought about how they perceive their identity. A design flaw that only became apparent after the collection of results.
- One respondent did not answer.

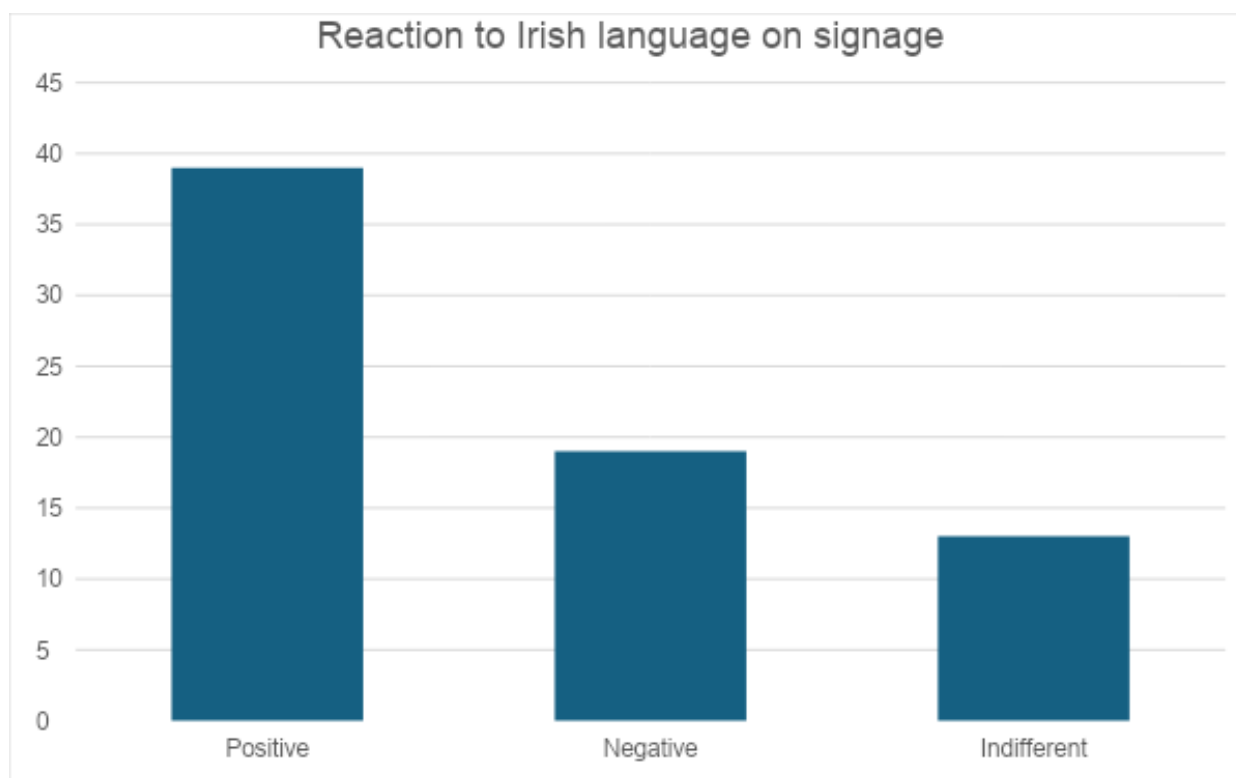
Conclusion, the most common response is a yes or no answer. The affirmative is slightly more common; however, a significant number (26 vs 32) do not consider it to be.



Q.3 If you hear or see Irish, for example on street signs, official documentation, in a public or online space do you feel

- "Positive" is the most common response, with 42 entries.
- "Negative" is the second most common response with 19 selections.
- "Indifferent" is the least frequent response with 13. While it is the smallest, it is not an insubstantial number.
- There are three instances of "Positive/Negative and Indifferent" responses. Hard to know if this means a conflict of feelings or a change of mind whilst completing a form or a glitch in reporting.

As with the first question, positive association is more common than negative. However, a significant number, one in four have negative responses.



Opinions:

Q.4 Do you think that the Irish language has a place in Northern Irish society?

Yes: 48 This is the most frequent response, indicating a majority view that the Irish language does have a place in Northern Irish society.

Maybe: Eleven responses. A notable portion of responses express ambivalence or uncertainty about the Irish language's place.

No: Twelve. While the least common response, it indicates that over one in six, a considerable number, feels that the Irish language does not have a place in this context.

Don't care: One.

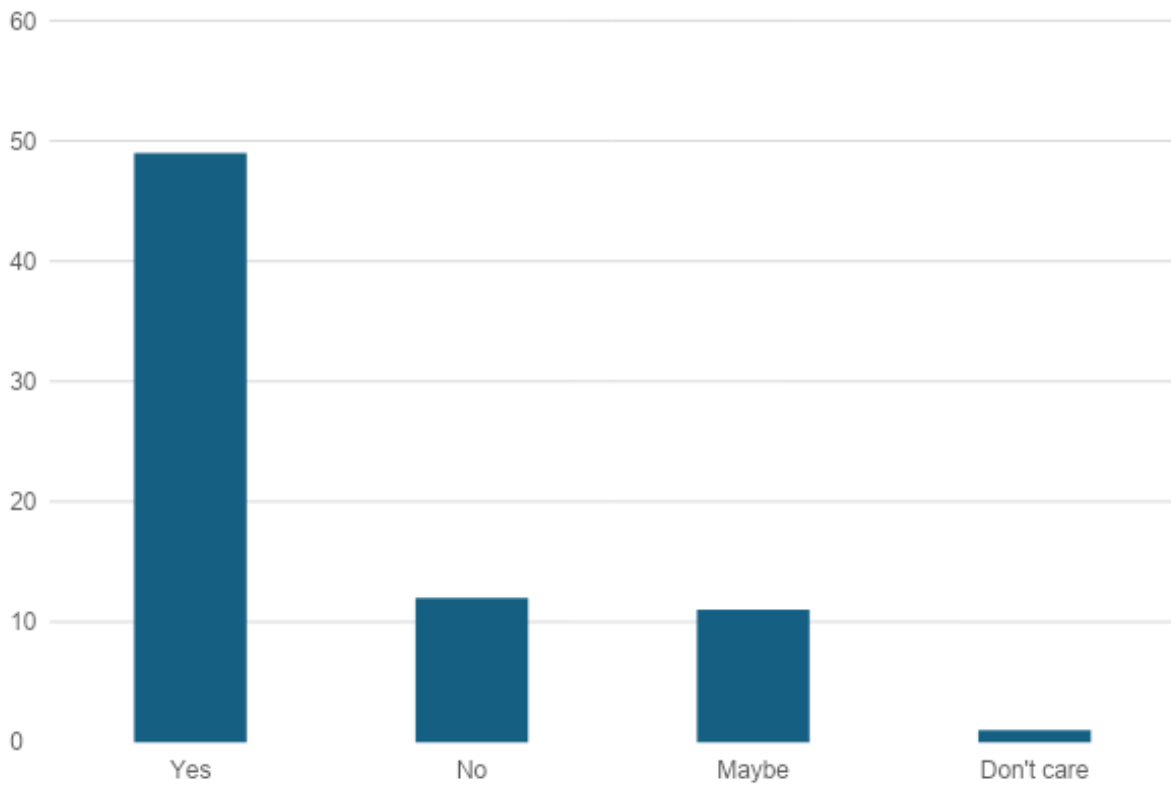
While the overwhelming majority feel that Northern Irish Society there is a place for the Irish

A few additional observations:

There were five yes responses for every single "No" responses, suggesting more acceptance than rejection of Irish having a place in public spaces.

The presence of "Maybe" and a couple "Don't care" responses reveals some ambiguity among respondents.

Do you think that the Irish language has a place in Northern Irish society.



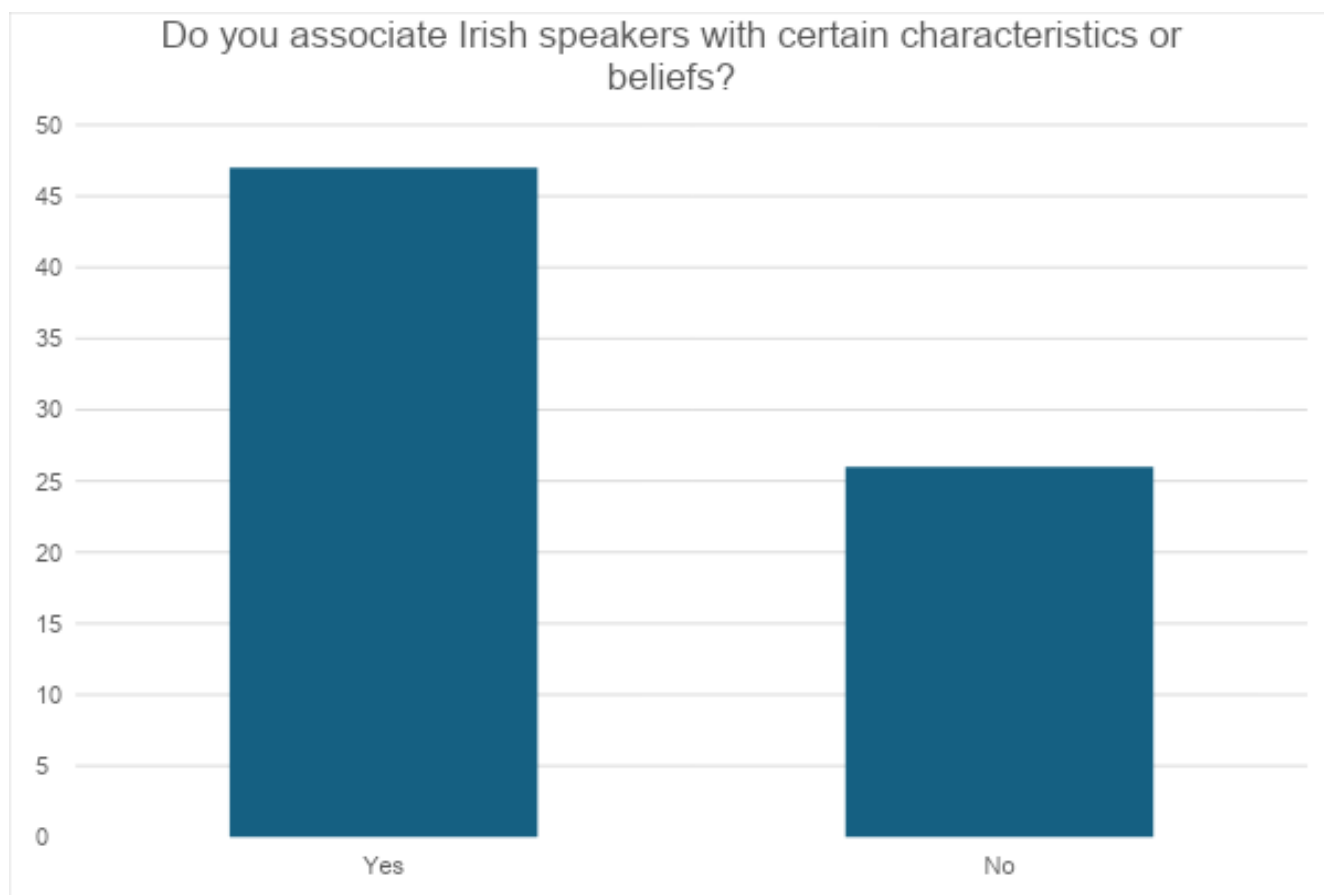
Q.5 When you think of people who speak Irish, do you associate the person with a particular belief for example, age, gender, educational background, job, political identity, or community background?

Most respondents, forty-nine of them out of seventy-six, associate speaking the Irish language with other beliefs, identities, or backgrounds. However, there is a notable segment twenty-six out of seventy-five that do not make such associations.

Common associations mentioned include:

- Nationalist/Republican political identity
- Catholic religious background
- Connection to an Irish cultural identity
- Younger people or those educated in Irish language schools.
- Middle class/educated backgrounds.

We would like to note that there were references made that assumptions may have been true historically but are less applicable now with more diverse groups learning and speaking Irish.

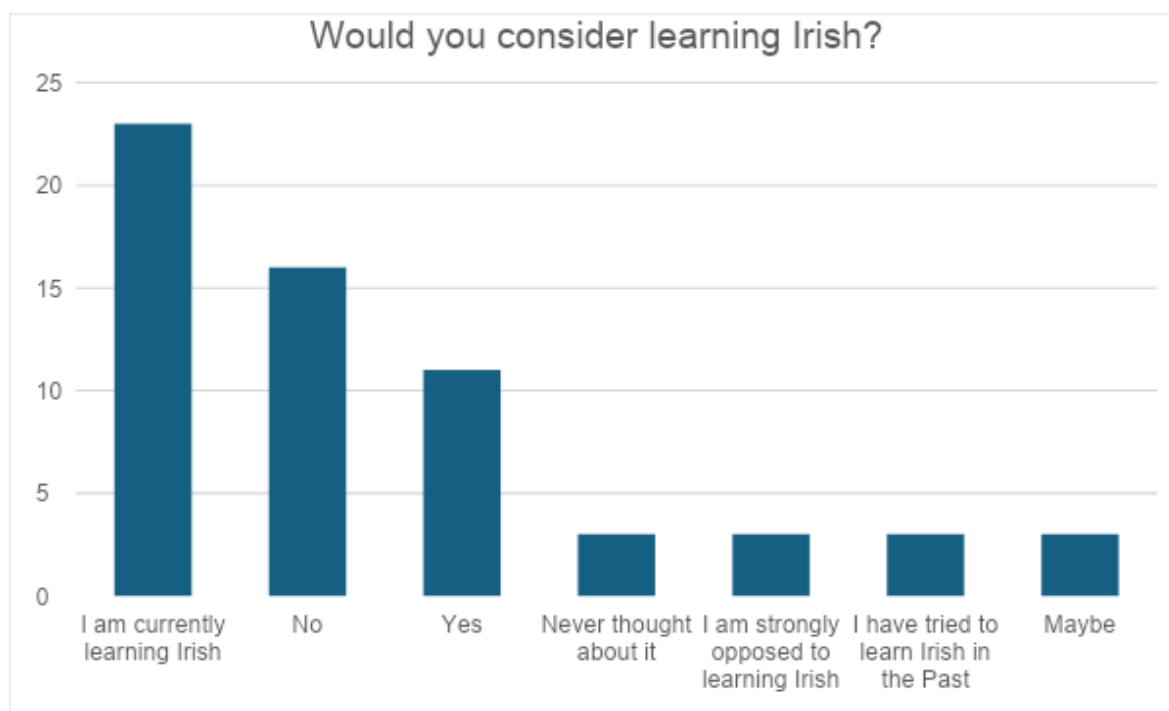


Actions:

Q.6 Would you ever consider learning Irish?

- I am currently learning Irish: at twenty-six is the most common response.
- No: seventeen would not consider learning Irish.
- Yes: eleven
- I have tried to learn in the past: ten.
- Maybe/Have never thought about it: seven ambivalent or uncertain.
- I am strongly opposed to learning Irish. Four individuals selected this option.

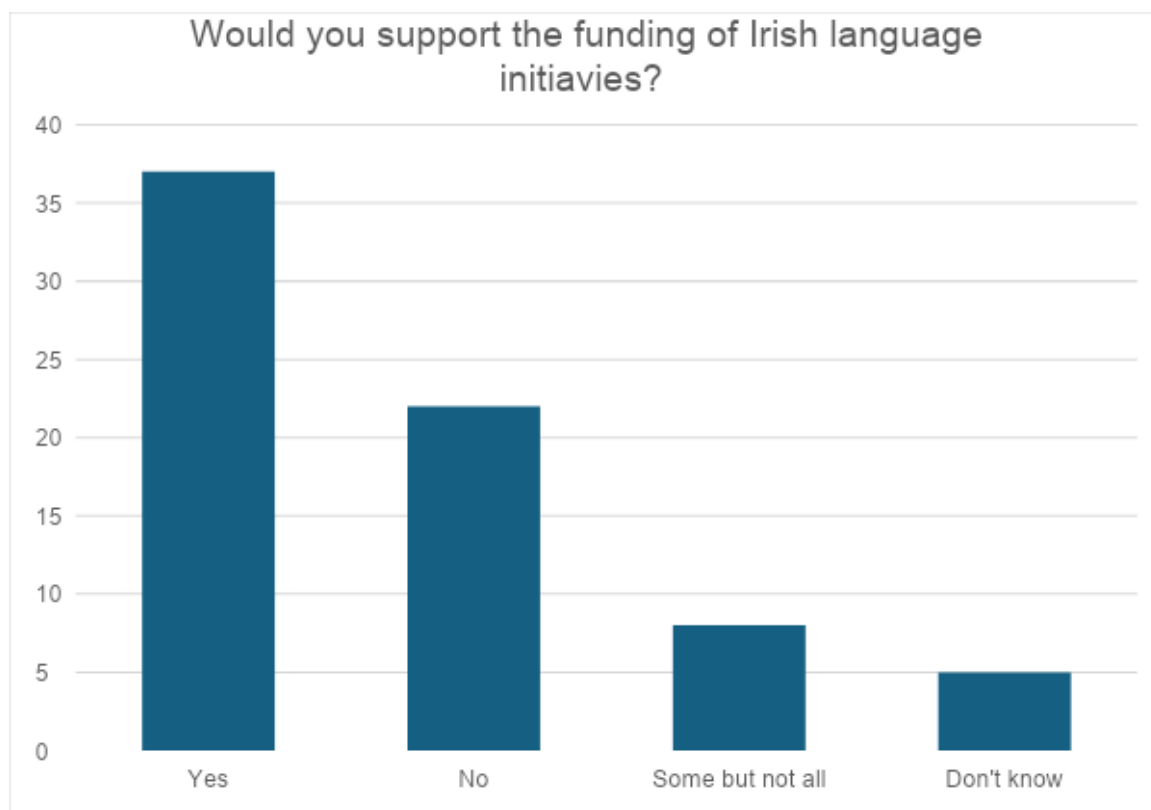
Conclusion: Respondents are more likely to consider or have considered learning Irish than not. However, there were a sizeable number of negative responses that cannot be ignored.



Q.7 Would you support the funding of Irish language initiatives?

- Yes: Thirty-seven, this was the most common response
- No: twenty-two respondents do not support funding language initiatives.
- Some but not all: nine said that for some but not all language initiatives.
- Do not know: five small number respondents expressed uncertainty or did not have a firm stance on this issue.

Conclusion: One out of every two of respondents would support Irish language initiatives. One in four would not. Just over one in ten would support some but not all initiatives. Broadly speaking it appears that, where there was support for some but not all initiatives, wholesale translation of official documents or signage would not be welcome.



Identity:

Q.8 If you had to describe yourself to someone else who lives in Northern Ireland, how would you describe yourself?¹³

National/Cultural Identity:

- Irish
- Northern Irish
- British
- Hybrid/mixed identities (Irish/British, Northern Irish/British, etc.)
- From specific counties/regions (Down, Derry, West Belfast, etc.)

Community Background:

- Unionist/Protestant
- Nationalist/Catholic
- Neither unionist nor nationalist
- Describing themselves outside of those traditional backgrounds

Other:

- Class backgrounds (middle class, working class)
- Occupations/roles (mother, wife, student, farmer, etc.)
- Personal interests (music, technology, Irish language, etc.)
- Values/beliefs (liberal, socialist, live-and-let-live, opposed to extremism, etc.)

Note: Personal values, interests, and roles outside of background were noticeable.

Q.9 If you were to describe yourself to someone who was visiting Northern Ireland, from another country, how would you describe yourself?¹⁴

National/Cultural Identity:

- Irish
- Northern Irish
- British
- Ulster Scots/Scots Irish
- Hybrid identities (Irish with British overlay, British/Northern Irish)

¹³ Note: In line with the ethos of the commissioning body, the question of identity was deliberately left open. We wanted to see what elements of identity were significant to the respondents themselves. However, on examination it appears that the answers could arguably be grouped into three types of descriptors: National/Community and Other. Whether this was due to an assumption of what constitutes identity or how the respondents view identity, is outside of the scope of this research.

¹⁴ As before, this question was deliberately left open. However, the researcher was curious to see if descriptors would change in response to a national or geographical clarification, for example outside of Northern Ireland. They did in some instances but not others.

Community Background:

- From a Protestant/Unionist background
- From a Catholic/Nationalist background
- Not defining themselves by those traditional backgrounds

Geographic/Regional Identity:

- Specifying counties/areas they are from (Derry, West Belfast, countryside etc.)
- Describing themselves as living in Northern Ireland/North of Ireland

Personal Characteristics/Interests:

- Occupations/Roles (mother, wife, student, retired etc.)
- Personal values (welcoming, broad-minded, patient, thoughtful etc.)
- Personal Interests (Irish language, music, dancing, culture)
- Other identities (non-binary, bisexual)

Note: When describing themselves in the first question, respondents were more likely to make a distinction based on class. This did not happen in the second instance.

When answering the question from the perspective of speaking to someone from outside of Northern Ireland. People were more inclined to include a geographical or regional identifier.

For example: One respondent initially described themselves as: "Born in the south of Ireland, neither nationalist or unionist, somewhere in between " However, when asked how they would describe themselves to a visitor, they simply said: "Northern Irish."

Another respondent first said: "Church of Ireland and a unionist background, I am a believer of live and let live- don't believe in pushing your beliefs and ideas on other people. This covers politics, religion, abortion, LGBT etc." But to a visitor they stated more concisely: "I am Church of Ireland and unionist background, believe that Northern Ireland should remain as it is and remain as part of the United Kingdom."

There are a few other examples where the second response portraying themselves to a visitor was more direct and explicit about their national/political identity as Irish, British, Unionist etc. Compared to their first responses which tended to be more nuanced or multi-layered for many others, however their responses did not change substantially between the two prompts, and they maintained a consistent way of describing themselves.

Appendix 1

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Appendix 2

Complete text of survey questionnaire.

Attitudes towards the Irish language among ‘non-traditional’ learners – Questionnaire.

We are currently looking to hear from people in Northern Ireland who had no opportunities to access any form of Irish language learning at educational or community level **or** who were discouraged from learning Irish due to the perception that it was “**not for us**”.

The purpose of this research is two-fold. Firstly, it hopes to inform a better understanding of barriers to participation in communities that would presently have limited opportunities to learn Irish. It is hoped that this will improve access to and broaden inclusion of those who would like to learn more about the language. Secondly, it hopes to inform members of the Irish language community as to how conversations around language are perceived. It is hoped that this understanding will help to move us in the direction of better navigating the strong emotions that can arise when we talk about minority languages.

Notes for completion:

You can fill in this survey in one of two ways:

Firstly: Check the appropriate box to register a general opinion. Should take no more than 5 mins.

Secondly: Questions are offered as prompts. Please take this as an invitation to share your thoughts in more detail. Should take approximately 25 mins to complete.

A note on confidentiality and anonymity. Please note all responses are confidential and anonymous. Any opinions or feedback will be reported as anonymous. We require no identifying information, and no email addresses will be collected or saved.

Q.1 Could you share your initial feeling when you hear “Irish Language?” Is it:

Positive

Negative

Indifferent

Optional: Would you be willing to elaborate on this? For example, I feel...curious, annoyed, indifferent, angry, or interested?

Q.2 Do you think that your attitude to the Irish language plays a role in shaping how you perceive your identity, (personal or cultural)

Yes

No

I’ve never thought about it.

Optional: Irish is/is not relevant to my identity because....

Q.3 If you hear or see Irish, for example on street signs, official documentation, in a public or online space do you feel:

Positive

Negative

Indifferent

Optional: Would you be willing to elaborate on this? For example, I would feel...because...

Q.4 Do you think that the Irish language has a place in Northern Irish society?

Yes

No

Maybe

Don’t care.

Optional: I think it should/should not have a place in our society because...

Q.5 When you think of people who speak Irish, do you associate the person with a particular belief for example, age, gender, educational background, job, political identity or community background?

Yes

No

If yes, could you list some of them below?

Q.6 Would you ever consider learning Irish?

Yes

I am currently learning Irish.

I have tried to learn Irish in the Past

Maybe

Never thought about it

No

I am strongly opposed to learning Irish.

Q.7 Would/ do you support funding for Irish language initiatives? For example, translation of official documentation or online resources, signposts, funding classes or passing legislation.

Yes

No

Don't know.

Some but not all

Would you be willing to elaborate on this? For example, what you would or would not support...

A little bit about you (Optional)

Do you have a preferred way of identifying yourself, that you would like to share with us? We know that for some, this question is straightforward and for others, it can be more complicated. Please know that we are not interested in putting people in boxes, we are interested in how you see yourself. With that in mind, describe yourself with any words or phrases that suit you:

Q.8 If you had to describe yourself to someone else who lives in Northern Ireland, how would you describe yourself?

Q.9 If you were to describe yourself to someone who was visiting Northern Ireland, from another country, how would you describe yourself?