

“@Cmdr_Hadfield: Tá Éire fíorálainn! –

Some policy challenges for Irish in the performance era

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Borrowing from Ricento's (2006) taxonomy for understanding the evolution of language policy in relation to English in the post-colonial context, we can see minority language media policy as having three phases of development (cf. Kelly-Holmes 2009; Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011). The first is the gifting era, when the minority language community is gifted valuable resources in the form of media space by, in general, the national government or other appropriate authority. In the next phase, the service era, minority language media move to become a full service provider, being all things to all speakers. In the current phase, the performance era, the community fragments, as do concepts of language, and control of media production becomes decentralised. The performance era is made possible by the development of digital technology and its challenge to old media, including old minority language media.

In the gifting phase, the primary policy actor with the greatest agency is, not surprisingly, the state; in the service era, it is the media professionals and associated companies; in the performance era, we can see the individual as the primary actor, in line with Friedman's (2006) view of the individual's role in globalisation 3.0, as a result of digital technology.

The conditions which present challenges (and opportunities) for Irish language media are similar to those for all 'old' media in the current era. For example, the change from the monologic model of media, where there was one to many communication, to a dialogic or even polylogic model. While one-to-many media do still exist, increasingly, alongside these and increasingly overshadowed by them on the Web, are many-to-many, and also one-to-one models. In addition, however, there are also particular challenges for minority language media and policy.

First of all, there is a move from a rights based model to a lifestyle/consumption based model – Ó Laoire (2008), for example, uses the term ‘speakers of choice’. Speech communities are no longer defined geographically (in national, regional or local terms), but instead are self-selecting and characterised less by location, than by competence, interest, a desire for self-actualisation and performance, and political ideology – this being understood as a commitment to maintaining the minority language. Speakers are now also primarily consumers, and new technology makes it possible to serve their needs, since the Web breaks down the traditional economies of scale that favour publishing media in big languages. Speakers of Irish and other minority languages have become niche consumers in long tail markets.

New media represent a decline in the professional role of the media. Facebook, for example, invites anyone to join the community of translators. There is no requirement to prove proficiency or evidence educational achievement in the relevant language (contrast this with the policy in place up to recently that required all presenters on Ireland’s Irish language radio station to be native speakers). Crowdsourcing is fast becoming the norm for web localisation and this means that some languages are now bypassing the gifting and service phases altogether. The Web is now an immense and exponentially expanding corpus of language, fed by users. In this way it ‘learns’ and this learning in turn feeds language use on the Web through programmes and applications such as Google translate.

Finally, in all of this, there is of course the danger of fetishizing the presence of a minority language in new media as a goal in itself. In relation to ‘old’ media, it was frequently argued that the presence of an endangered language in the media was enough to consider it still alive. This dilemma is illustrated by the quote in the title of this paper, which is, depending on one’s point of view, an entirely meaningless or deeply meaningful tweet. The tweet was made from a space station by an American astronaut who does not speak Irish, and does not represent an attempt to use Irish in a communicative way. He was travelling over Ireland and could also simply have chosen a piece of

traditional music as easily as some Irish text. On the other hand, we could look at the presence of Irish in a global (extra-global?), high-status domain such as this as symbolically very meaningful.

References

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