

## **Linguistic Elitism: the Advantage of Speaking Irish Rather than the Irish-speaker Advantage**

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*Abstract:* This paper contributes to the discussion of linguistic elitism in this journal (Borooah *et al.*, 2009). Two main questions are addressed. First, most “census Irish speakers” are not in fact Irish speakers and the majority of Irish speakers proper are not a coherent group. Second, the Irish language is part of the cultural capital which can be acquired by people with an “advantage.” The argument is made that people with an advantage are more likely to speak Irish rather than Irish speakers being more likely to have an advantage.

### I INTRODUCTION

We read with interest the article by Borooah *et al.* (2009) in this journal (Vol. 40, No. 4), in which they argued that “Irish speakers ... have considerable advantage in the labour market” (p. 436). Their point is that Irish speakers have a better chance of attaining employment in professional, management or technical (PMT) occupations. We have also examined this question of Irish-speaker advantage. We examined the possibility that Irish speakers have a better chance of going to university (Watson and Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 2008; Watson and Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 2009). There appears to be a connection between the Irish language and “advantage,” which requires further sociological investigation. In this paper we hope to begin to unravel some of the complexities of this connection. Illogical as it may appear at first glance, we will reverse, to some extent, Borooah *et al.*’s argument. We will contend that it is more fruitful not to approach it as a question of Irish speakers having an advantage, but, rather, to approach it from a different direction and see it as a question of people with an advantage being more likely to speak Irish.

We will deconstruct what appears to be the implicit ontology in Borooah *et al.*'s paper: that there is a community of Irish speakers whose children attend *Gaelscoileanna* (Irish-language schools) at primary and second level, who achieve higher than average points in their Leaving Certificate examination,<sup>1</sup> are therefore more likely than non-Irish speakers to attend a third-level institution and get a good job (partly thanks to “pull” from being in a network of Irish speakers). We will clarify how this, rather than being the typical lifecycle of an Irish speaker, is in fact very untypical.

## II DO IRISH SPEAKERS HAVE AN ADVANTAGE?

In this section it is argued that the majority of “census Irish speakers” are not Irish speakers, that the majority of pupils in *Gaelscoileanna* do not come from Irish-speaking families and that Irish speakers do not form a coherent community or network. A clearer understanding is required of who are the Irish speakers and of how any advantages can be associated with them as Irish speakers.

### 2.1 *Are All Irish Speakers in the Census Really Irish Speakers?*

Borooah *et al.* (2009) worked with Census data, according to which 42% of the population speak Irish. This percentage has remained relatively stable during the past three Censuses (1996, 2002 and 2006). Nonetheless, the proportion of the population of the Republic of Ireland who, according to the Census, claim to be able to speak Irish, has increased steadily since Independence, from less than a quarter during the 1920s to more than a quarter by the 1970s to almost a third in the 1980s. There are two issues we should examine in relation to these high numbers of “Irish speakers”: first, how often they speak Irish and, second, their ability to speak Irish.<sup>2</sup> In recent Censuses there has been an additional question about frequency of use. From this we find that only one in twenty of the “Irish speakers” speak Irish on a daily basis outside the education system and an equal number speak Irish on a weekly basis. This means that nine out of ten “Irish speakers” speak Irish only at school or very infrequently or never.

To examine ability to speak Irish we must turn to other surveys. *CLAR* (1976) (the Committee on Irish Language Attitude Research) conducted a survey in 1973 and this was repeated in 1983 and 1993 by the Linguistics

<sup>1</sup> The Leaving Certificate examination is taken at the end of second level education, normally at around eighteen years of age.

<sup>2</sup> There is a third issue of who completes the Census form on behalf of others in the household.

Institute of Ireland. Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin (1994, p. 5) found that in 1993 about 2 per cent of the population had a native-speaker ability and about 9 per cent could engage in most conversations (down from 3 per cent and 10 per cent in both of the previous surveys). Similarly, the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) survey on national identity in 2003 found that 16 per cent of the respondents claimed to be able to speak Irish well. We can make an educated guess from these surveys and from the Census that about 2-3 per cent of the population of Ireland are Irish speakers who live in the *Gaeltacht*<sup>3</sup> or are Irish speakers with native speaker ability living outside the *Gaeltacht*; 10-12 per cent can engage in most conversations in Irish; 20-25 per cent can engage in parts of conversations in Irish; and up to 10 per cent claim to be able to speak Irish despite having at best a few words of Irish.

The Census figures tell us more about attitude than ability or practice. We would argue that only about a third, of the 42 per cent “census Irish speakers”, could be considered Irish speakers. The other two-thirds have varying ability, but are positively disposed toward the Irish language. There is evidence in other surveys that this attitude is even more widespread, e.g. the survey by MORI (2004), which found that 89 per cent of the respondents agreed that “promoting the Irish language is important to the country as a whole” (p. 7).

Although we can be a little more precise (albeit perhaps still generous) by claiming that 16 per cent (not 42 per cent) of the population could be considered to be Irish speakers, we cannot consider them some kind of ethnic group or community. If we take Borooah *et al.*'s (2009, p. 438) breakdown of census figures we can calculate that only 2 per cent of the population speak Irish daily outside the education system. This suggests that the majority of Irish speakers currently do not reside in Irish-speaking families or communities. Also, the reality in *Gaelscoileanna* undermines the idea of a community or ethnic group on two grounds. First, there are not enough *Gaelscoileanna* to serve the Irish-speaking 16 per cent of the population (let alone the 58 per cent of 3-19 year olds who were returned as Irish speakers in the 2006 Census). In the school year 2009-10 only 4.3 per cent of pupils were attending a *Gaelscoil*<sup>4</sup> (5.7 per cent at primary level and 2.2 per cent at second level)<sup>5,6</sup>. Second, it appears that the majority of pupils attending *Gaelscoileanna* do not come from Irish-speaking families. While recent data is

<sup>3</sup> The *Gaeltacht* consists of Irish-speaking communities, which are located mainly in small pockets along the west-coast of Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> *Gaelscoil* is the singular of *Gaelscoileanna*.

<sup>5</sup> These percentages are based on data from The Department of Education and Skills ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)) and from *Gaelscoileanna* Teo. ([www.gaelscoileanna.ie](http://www.gaelscoileanna.ie)).

<sup>6</sup> However, Ó Riagáin claimed that, based on census figures of pre-school Irish-speaking children, ‘Irish language homes outside the *Gaeltacht* ... form ... less than 5 per cent of all households’ (1997, p. 193).

not yet available to confirm this anecdotal evidence, it is unlikely that the pattern has altered greatly since the study by Pádraig Ó Riagáin and Mícheál Ó Gliasáin (1979) in the late 1970s which found that prior to the child's attendance at a *Gaelscoil*

... only 15 per cent of the families used Irish extensively (i.e. 50 per cent of the time or more often); while for approximately two-thirds of the families little or no Irish was used by anyone in the home. (p. 58)

They also argued that "... the evidence suggests that the schools do not draw their support only, or mainly, from Irish-speaking families" (p. 9). Indeed, a study of Irish-speaking families outside *Gaeltacht* areas in the late 1990s by Nic Ghiolla Phádraig (1999) recorded a significant minority (40 per cent) who felt ill-served by *Gaelscoileanna* as they were focused on children with no prior knowledge of Irish (p. 16).

In the 1960s there were considerable political and economic changes. This had an impact on the Irish language; for example, less Irish was spoken in the media than in the previous few decades (see Watson, 1996) and some of the compulsory aspects of Irish in the education system were relaxed (for example, after 1973 it was no longer necessary to pass Irish in order to pass the Leaving Certificate examination) (see Kelly (2002) for a discussion of compulsory Irish in the education system). Also in the 1950s and 1960s many all-Irish schools closed or changed to teaching in English. From the 1970s there was a growth in Irish-language activism such as the *Gaeltacht* Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were also several organisations seeking more television programmes in Irish, and there has been a continuing growth in the number of *Gaelscoileanna* throughout the country, albeit still only accounting for 4.3 per cent of schools by 2009 ([www.cso.ie/px/des/database/des/des.asp](http://www.cso.ie/px/des/database/des/des.asp) and [www.gaelscoileanna.ie/about/statistics](http://www.gaelscoileanna.ie/about/statistics)).

We find then that not 42 per cent, but at most 16 per cent of the population are Irish speakers. We also find that these Irish speakers can hardly be considered a community because very few of them have an opportunity to speak Irish daily. Finally, we find that the education system, which is an important locus of cultural capital advantage, is not structured to the advantage of Irish speakers because there are not enough *Gaelscoileanna* and they are mostly attended by children from non-Irish-speaking families.

## 2.2 Do *Gaelscoileanna* Provide Irish Speakers with an "Advantage"?

Although up to 16 per cent of the country could be considered Irish speakers, there are places for less than 6 per cent of the primary school pupils in *Gaelscoileanna* and very few of those pupils come from Irish-speaking

families. The situation is more extreme at second level, where barely more than 2 per cent of pupils can attend a *Gaelscoil*. For example, in south Dublin there are eight primary *Gaelscoileanna*, but only two at second level – one for boys and one for girls (at time of writing, the Minister for Education announced that a new mixed-sex second-level all-Irish school would open in south Dublin in 2014). The vast majority of the pupils who attend a primary *Gaelscoil* in this area cannot attend a second-level *Gaelscoil*. The situation is the same nationally. In 2009-10, 28,581 pupils attended a primary *Gaelscoil*, but, in the same year, only 7,468 attended a second-level *Gaelscoil*. There is a demand for more *Gaelscoileanna*, both from Irish-speaking parents with no *Gaelscoil* near their home and from non-Irish-speaking parents. This is evident in the increase in the number of *Gaelscoileanna* from 15 in 1972 (5 second level and 10 primary) to 174 in 2010 (36 second level and 138 primary).<sup>7</sup> At the time of writing there are separate committees campaigning for a further 14 *Gaelscoileanna* (8 second level and 6 primary) and interest (but no committee) in 5 more. Occasionally a committee even opens a *Gaelscoil* without recognition from the Department of Education.<sup>8</sup>

The main advantage mentioned by Borooah *et al.* (2009) in relation to second-level *Gaelscoileanna* is bonus marks for taking Leaving Certificate examinations in Irish. The precise details of these bonus marks are available on the State Examinations Commission's website. It states that 0 per cent, 3 per cent, 5 per cent or 10 per cent (depending on the subject) "... of marks obtained will be given to a candidate who obtains less than 75 per cent of the total marks ... Above 75 per cent the bonus will be subjected to a uniform reduction until the candidate who scores 100 per cent gets no bonus" ([www.examinations.ie/candidates](http://www.examinations.ie/candidates)). As Borooah *et al.* (2009) mentioned "... such claims are promptly rubbished by others ... the extra points system is not as generous as it appears and, in any event, they are awarded to compensate for a paucity of learning materials in Irish" (p. 437). This claim may have been more relevant in the past when Leaving Certificate textbooks were not available in Irish. Pupils were required to read the books in English, learn the terminology in Irish and answer the examinations fully in Irish. "Candidates who answer partly in Irish and partly in English will receive no bonus marks" ([www.examinations.ie/candidates](http://www.examinations.ie/candidates)). Although the situation has improved somewhat, a perusal of [www.schoolbooks.ie](http://www.schoolbooks.ie) is enough to demonstrate that the books available in Irish are only a fraction of the books available in English for Leaving Certificate subjects. The most telling evidence

<sup>7</sup> The *Gaelscoil* figures throughout this paper do not include *Gaeltacht* schools or all-Irish schools in Northern Ireland.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in September 2010, *Gaelscoil Rath Tó* opened in a community centre despite not having recognition from the Department of Education.

comes from research recently published by Mac Aogáin *et al.* (2010) who found that more than half the candidates in their study (of several Leaving Certificate subjects in which the candidates took the examinations in Irish) received no bonus points, just less than half received five bonus points and only 5 per cent received ten bonus points.<sup>9</sup> They also claimed that the chance of one student being awarded bonus points which would bring an A2 up to an A1 in four subjects was 100,000 to 1.

Borooah *et al.* (2009) mentioned another claim which is “promptly rubbished” that “Irish-speaking schools (*Gaelscoileanna*) [are] bastions of middle class privilege” (p. 437).<sup>10</sup> This is a claim which may help to explain the advantage that Irish speakers have. As Ó Riagáin (1997) argued, there is a “... strong relationship between parents’ social class and language reproduction through the education system” (p. 226).<sup>11</sup> We would argue that rather than Irish speakers having an advantage, “middle class” people (loosely defined) have an advantage and a higher percentage of them are (or claim to be) able to speak Irish. The advantages which Borooah *et al.* (2009, p. 445) mentioned as “the quality of education” – “good teachers,” “committed parents,” “positive social selection,” “good academic reputations” could all be put down to “middle class” advantage generally, rather than *Gaelscoileanna* specifically.

It appears that *Gaelscoileanna* have an advantage when it comes to “feeding” pupils into the third-level institutions. Borooah *et al.* (2009) argued that “53 schools, of a total of 707 feeder schools sent *all* their students to third level institutions (7 per cent), compared to the 10 of the 46 *Gaelscoils* (22 per cent) who also did the same” (p. 446). We appreciate that this is evidence of their claim that “Irish-speaking schools (*Gaelscoileanna*) [are] bastions of middle class privilege” and we add that further evidence of this claim is to be found in the fact that we could find only one *Gaeltacht* school which sent all its students to third-level institutions – this was Gairmscoil Corr na Móna in County Galway, which had only 10 pupils in the graduating class.<sup>12</sup> As there are a total of 18 *Gaeltacht* second-level schools, we calculate that 5.6 per cent

<sup>9</sup> ‘Points’ refers to the CAO (Central Applications Office) points system in which there is normally a 15-point difference between grades, e.g. D2 is 50 points, C2 is 65 points, B2 is 80 points, but an A2 is 90 points.

<sup>10</sup> Although the location of some *Gaelscoileanna* in Local Authority housing estates (e.g. Scoil an tSeachtar Laoich, Ballymun; Gaelscoil Bharra, Cabra; and Scoil Chaitlín Maude, Jobstown in Dublin) is indicative of a broadening of the class basis of this movement, *Gaelscoileanna* remain a more middle-class phenomenon.

<sup>11</sup> However, he went on to argue that there was less class polarisation of Irish speakers under 35 than above 35 years of age (in 1993) (p. 228).

<sup>12</sup> This is from *The Irish Times Supplement* on feeder schools, 26 November, 2009.

of *Gaeltacht* schools sent *all* their students to third-level institutions. This is not only lower than the *Gaelscoileanna* (22 per cent), but is also lower than the national average (7 per cent) mentioned above. We would argue that the advantage of *Gaelscoileanna* appears to be absent from the *Gaeltacht* schools where Irish is also the medium of instruction. We argue that the advantage is based, not on the Irish language, but on cultural capital. We will return to this point toward the end of the paper.

### 2.3 *Do Irish Speakers Have an Advantage?*

One of the main advantages discussed by Borooah *et al.* (2009, pp. 448-450) was that “Irish speakers form a *network* of social contacts” (p. 448) from which they gain an employment advantage. They discussed the concept of social network, but did not provide evidence that Irish speakers form a social network or gain any advantage if such a network exists.

The question of Irish speakers forming a network is one which requires research. In her Ph.D. thesis Lelia Murtagh (2003) mentioned networks of Irish speakers. She argued that the people most likely to continue speaking Irish, having completed their education, were those who had attended a *Gaelscoil*. One reason for this was that they had access to Irish-speaking networks. Therefore, Irish speakers can have access to a network of Irish speakers. There does not appear to be anything special here. There are countless English-speaking social networks in Ireland, based on shared interests or shared experiences (such as having attended the same school). Irish speakers are the same; as Borooah *et al.* (2009) argued, they can form “... interpersonal networks as made up of individuals who share common attributes in terms of membership of a social category (for example, ethnic background or occupation)” (p. 448). The only exception here is when the shared interest of the network is the Irish language. There are networks of Irish language activists, but they do not account for 16 per cent of the population, let alone 42 per cent. A network of hundreds of thousands of activists would hardly go unnoticed. One must also remember that although networks of past pupils of *Gaelscoileanna* can exist, there is no all-Irish university, and therefore the possibilities for the emergence of networks of Irish-speaking graduates, which one would assume to be more apposite to PMT employment, are limited.

The main advantage which an Irish-speaking network would have is the same as the advantage which English-speaking networks can have: more cultural capital. The only difference between English-speaking and Irish-speaking networks with an advantage is the ability to speak Irish. There is no evidence that the ability to speak Irish provides a general intrinsic additional advantage.

In an earlier section above we argued that Irish speakers could not be considered a cohesive ethnic group or community. We now add that Irish speakers do not form a single cohesive network. The hundreds of thousands of people who speak Irish well cannot be considered to be one large homogenous group, community or network. They are merely people who can speak Irish well. The intrinsic advantage they share is the ability to speak Irish. Borooh *et al.* (2009, p. 446) discussed the inherent advantage which Irish speakers have in Mathematical performance as well as reading English.<sup>13</sup> These advantages are not exclusive to Irish speakers, but are shared with others around the world who have bilingual and multilingual proficiency in any languages.

The more concrete evidence that Irish speakers have an advantage is that they are more likely than non-Irish speakers to have a higher level of education. Borooh *et al.* (2009) mentioned that some "... of the observed difference between Irish speaking and non-speaking workers in their proportions in PMT jobs" (p. 456) could be explained by third-level qualification. Elsewhere we have argued that although Irish speakers were more likely than non-Irish speakers to have continued to third-level education, the difference was there only for people born before 1970 (Watson and Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 2009). We will discuss this further below.

### III ARE PEOPLE WITH AN "ADVANTAGE" MORE LIKELY TO SPEAK IRISH?

As will be argued below, people with cultural capital can accumulate further capital – a kind of "Matthew effect" (as coined by Robert Merton over forty years ago). The Irish language is a form of capital required for entry into some universities and into some types of public employment. The argument here is that those with cultural capital are in an advantaged position to acquire educational capital such as good grades in Irish (as well as in other subjects) and thereby gain entry to university and to PMT jobs. People in PMT jobs, therefore, are more likely to be able to speak Irish even though the majority of them do not speak Irish regularly and do not come from Irish-speaking families or communities.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of these two advantages see Ni Ríordáin and O'Donoghue (2009) (as referred to in Borooh *et al.* (2009, p. 446)) and Bournot-Trites and Tellowitz (2002) (as referred to in [www.gaelscoileanna.ie](http://www.gaelscoileanna.ie)), respectively.



### 3.1 *Are PMT Workers More Likely to Have Irish?*

We presume that the PMT jobs discussed by Borooah *et al.* (2009) are those coded 100-399 by the Central Statistics Office: “Managers and administrators” (100-199), “Professional Occupations” (200-293), “Associate Professional and Technical occupations” (294-399). Among these occupations are those public sector jobs for which there is an expectation (often training and an examination) that the employee can speak Irish e.g., teachers (in primary and secondary schools, in vocational education, further education, higher education and Institutes of Technology); senior police officers; senior civil servants; etc. Irish speakers, even in such occupations that expect a competency in the language, except for teachers of Irish, would likely not have an opportunity to speak the language at work on a daily basis (in comparison to the 1950s when the working language for many employees in Radio Éireann and in the Department of Education was Irish (see Watson, 2003, p. 35 and 2007, p. 364, respectively). The expectation, training and examinations would lead to a higher percentage of people with an above-average ability in the Irish language in such occupations when compared with other occupations. However, without being part of Irish-speaking networks or domains, such Irish speakers would consider themselves to be no more members of an Irish-speaking community, than they would consider themselves members of a French-speaking community (or a community of whatever other languages they speak as well as Irish). These are individuals who can speak Irish, many of whom learned Irish in the same way they learned foreign languages – at school, rather than at home.

Individuals in PMT jobs, whether Irish speakers or not, are more likely to have third-level qualifications (see Borooah *et al.*, 2009, pp. 447-448) – such employment is regarded by Borooah *et al.* as “occupational success” (p. 436). Such occupational success is dependent on educational success, from which we can make two generalisations: first, most of these individuals would have been taught Irish at school for about fourteen years and, second, these individuals would most likely have been good students generally – receiving good grades in Irish as well as in other subjects at school. In other words, in general, those who are occupationally successful are also educationally successful in many subjects, including Irish (which along with Mathematics and English form the core school subjects) and receive high enough grades in their Leaving Certificate examination to be accepted onto third-level courses.

Results in Irish appear to be a barometer of overall Leaving Certificate grades. In a report by Butler and Nic Ghiolla Phádraig (1999) analysis is made of the performance of higher education entrants in Leaving Certificate Irish for 1980, 1992 and 1998. Significant differences were found by socio-economic origin which indicate that this has a roughly positive association with taking

higher level Irish, although the ranking by group varies by year of examination (pp. 56-61). In 1992 and 1998 entrants to universities were approximately twice as likely to have taken higher level Irish than the national average (p. 61). By 1998, more than half of all university entrants had taken Irish at higher level (over 70 per cent of entrants to six of the seven universities). The proportion taking higher level Irish was substantially lower in the case of entrants to Institutes of Technology (11.6-34.5 per cent in 1992; 13.7-41.8 per cent in 1998). Colleges of Education, which have a minimum requirement of Grade C at higher level Irish, have almost 100 per cent at this level. When a case-study of University College Dublin (UCD) was examined, the grades obtained in Irish showed substantial variation by degree course. Higher professional courses – Medicine, Veterinary and Physiotherapy, for example – had the highest percentage of A1 and A2 grades at higher level Irish. Again, this is a reflection of the National University of Ireland (NUI) matriculation requirement of Irish together with the high CAO points level required of entrants to these courses (pp. 71-3). The latter, in turn, are significantly associated with higher socio-economic origins (Clancy and Wall, 2000).

A second such study by Nic Ghiolla Phádraig and Kilroe (2002) accessed School Leaver Survey data for 1992 and 1998 (to correspond with the years in Butler and Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 1999). Unfortunately, the data for 1998 was corrupted in a fashion that the ESRI and ISSDA were unable to repair. The data for 1992 were analysed focusing on the destinations of those who had sat Leaving Certificate Irish at higher and ordinary levels in 1991. Twice as many (81 per cent) of those taking Irish at higher level were students, as compared with those of ordinary level (40 per cent). Just over two in five who took Irish at ordinary level were working (42.5 per cent) and a further 16 per cent were unemployed/looking for first job. Of those who sat higher level Irish 13.6 per cent were working and only 4.5 per cent were unemployed/looking for first job. Ordinary level Irish examinees were over three times as likely to be working and the unemployment rate among this group was also over three times higher than for higher level examinees. The introduction of grade achieved in Irish had a predictive value in relation to employment situation at both higher and ordinary Level.

We may conclude that both taking Irish at higher level and the grade achieved (whether at higher or ordinary level Irish) are positively associated with access to third level education and with the pursuit of higher entrance level courses at third level. Furthermore, for those who do not enter third level on leaving school, the level at which Irish was taken in the Leaving Certificate and the grade achieved at both levels is positively associated with employment. Achievement levels in Irish are, therefore, a reflection of overall

academic prowess and are counted as such for both higher education and employment.

There is an interesting class dimension, which can be added to this discussion. Ó Riagáin (1997) found that although high achievement in the Leaving Certificate Irish examination has increased in the middle class generally, it has decreased among those whose father is employed in a higher professional or higher managerial position. He went on to argue that:

It would thus appear ... that for this group in particular, the educational decisions taken by students and families involve the adoption of a strategy which increasingly does not include Higher level Irish, or any Irish at all. As this group includes the élite elements in Irish society, this tendency clearly has implications for the long-term societal support for Irish. (pp. 211-212)

As the proportion of public, in comparison to private, employment has decreased since the 1960s, some of the “élite” may be preparing their children for positions which do not require fluency in Irish. Nonetheless, one would expect Irish speakers to be a high percentage of employees in the specific PMT jobs which expect or even require knowledge of Irish; particularly as there are further opportunities to take Irish-language lessons following the Leaving Certificate examination: students are taught Irish in third-level teacher training; and, even when employed, in these and other PMT jobs there are opportunities (sometimes requirements) to take further training and examinations in Irish. One would expect that individuals who are not Irish speakers to begin with would learn enough Irish to fulfil any Irish-language requirements of the job. This is less relevant for those who took up such employment since the early- or mid-1970s, since the removal in 1974 of the requirement for proficiency in Irish for recruits to the Civil Service and the removal in 1973 of the requirement to pass Irish in the Leaving Certificate. The last of those employed before these changes are now close to retirement. The negative impact of the relative decline of public sector employment on the prospects for Irish language vitality was predicted in a report produced by An Coiste Comhairleach Pleanála for Bord na Gaeilge in 1986 (p. 72).

### 3.2 *Does the Education System Make Irish Speakers?*

As we have seen above, most Irish speakers do not speak Irish on a daily basis. This suggests that they are not members of Irish-speaking families and, therefore, that the Irish language is not being transmitted to the next generation solely in the home. We have also seen that less than 5 per cent of pupils attend a *Gaelscoil* and most of the pupils in *Gaelscoileanna* come from

non-Irish-speaking families. This suggests that, although playing an important role in the inter-generational transmission of the Irish language, *Gaelscoileanna* are just part of the answer.<sup>14</sup> It appears that Irish-language education in English-language schools provides, at least, a solid foundation for the inter-generational transmission of the Irish language among the vast majority of the 42 per cent of the population who are “census Irish speakers” and perhaps even the majority of the 16 per cent who claim to be able to speak Irish well. The CLAR (1979, p. 16) report attributed approximately one-third of usage of Irish to learning Irish in school.

As Borooah *et al.* (2009, p. 440) pointed out, Irish speakers are more likely than non-Irish speakers to have “degree (or higher) level qualifications” (14 per cent compared to 9 per cent). We had a similar finding (see Watson and Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 2009) in our analysis of the ISSP 2003 survey data.<sup>15</sup> We found that

... almost half the Irish speakers (47.6 per cent) went on to tertiary education, compared with over a quarter of the rest (26.7 per cent). On calculating the odds ratio it can be said that Irish speakers were two and a half times more likely to have gone to university than non-Irish speakers. (pp. 149-150)

The odds ratio was highest among people aged 34-53 at the time of the survey. Among this group, Irish speakers were five times more likely than non-Irish speakers to have third-level education. The crucial point was, however, that among those aged 18-33 (i.e., born after 1970) we found no difference between Irish speakers and non-Irish speakers in the percentage with third-level education (49 per cent each).

As Ó Riagáin (1988) argued almost a quarter of a century ago: “... were it not for the fact that the schools continue to produce a small but committed percentage of bilinguals, the maintenance of this small minority of Irish speakers would long since have failed” (p. 7). Although Irish speakers have been more likely than non-Irish speakers to have a third-level qualification and are more likely to study education, most of these individuals are Irish speakers thanks to the education system. The intergenerational transmission of the Irish language is reliant on the teaching of Irish in English-language schools, probably even more than on *Gaelscoileanna* or on Irish-speaking families. The education system is probably the most crucial prop on which the survival of the Irish language relies. Those who do well at school are more

<sup>14</sup> There is evidence that attendance by children at a *Gaelscoil* increases their parents’ usage of Irish, both with their children and with others met through the school (Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin, 1979, pp. 118-120) (see also Walsh, 2011, pp.30-31).

<sup>15</sup> Information about and data from the International Social Survey Programme studies is available from <http://www.gesis.org/en/issp/>

likely, than those who do not, to achieve at least a basic level of proficiency in Irish. This means that rather than Irish speakers having an educational advantage, those with an educational advantage are more likely to become Irish speakers.

### 3.3 *The Question of Cultural Capital*

We argue that the concept “cultural capital” is a useful concept for understanding the overlap between the Irish language and social advantage. In this section we intend to do no more than make an initial foray into this topic, which we believe requires further theoretically-grounded empirical research.

In their paper Borooah *et al.* (2009, pp. 448-450) claimed that Irish speakers accumulate social capital from being part of a social network. As we have discussed above, the majority of Irish speakers (as considered by them) do not form an Irish-speaking social network. In fact, the majority of such “census Irish speakers” rarely speaks Irish. There may be a very small number, however, of Irish-speaking social networks composed of past pupils from particular *Gaelscoileanna* or composed of Irish language activists, but these are far over-shadowed by English-language networks of past pupils and people with shared interests. The accumulation of social capital in Irish-speaking networks is largely irrelevant to the vast majority of the Irish speakers.

Bourdieu (1983) argued that social capital is one of three basic types of capital:

... capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the forms of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the forms of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social obligations (“connections”), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the forms of a title of nobility. (p. 185)<sup>16</sup>

We have already argued that social capital is not centrally relevant here. A more appropriate concept, perhaps, is cultural capital.

Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines,

<sup>16</sup> The references used here are to the earliest version we could find (which is in German). For convenience, however, we have quoted from the English translation, which can be found at: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm>

etc.) ... ; and in the *institutionalised* state, a form of objectification ... seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. (p. 185) (see also Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990.)

Cultural capital refers to social (often educational) qualities or skills, which can endorse social advantage. Individuals acquire this capital through socialisation. In this way advantage can be maintained as social elites exploit the resources of education to reproduce their advantage from generation to generation. The embodied and the institutionalised are the more relevant states of cultural capital here, but we will return to that below.

Cultural capital is particularly relevant to the question addressed in this paper because in Ireland the education system was one of the main methods used by the State to promote the Irish language. The advantages of the Irish language, therefore, are entwined in the advantages of education. Although education is intended to be meritocratic, its resources are more readily accessed by those who have the cultural capital to do so. Lee (1989, p. 390f) argued that although the education system is based on a performance principle and that prestigious employment requires educational credentials, a possessor principle persists. He argued that because of demographic pressures before the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s possession was the dominant principle. Possession of the land was more important than working the land. He maintained that:

Occupational expansion in post-Famine Ireland occurred mainly in the public service, in teaching, nursing and the Catholic Church. Their distinguishing feature was that they did require some qualifications for entry. Educational requirements therefore introduced some performance criteria. But the education remained primarily functional in its purpose as a means to an end, not of knowledge, but of security. (p. 393)

The objective was to possess the land or prestigious (PMT) employment. He claimed that in employment the possessor principle was institutionalised in the form of promotion based on seniority rather than performance. Lee argued that in the mid-Twentieth Century Lemass tried to replace the possessor principle with the performance principle. Nonetheless, the structural features of the possessor principle are still evident in the instrumental rationality applied by the middle class to the education system – more focused on the accumulation of examination points and degrees than knowledge.

The Irish language is an educational resource. The special position of the Irish language until the early 1970s in the Leaving Certificate examination, as well as bonus points for proficiency in Irish in public service employment

and promotion<sup>17</sup> reinforced this advantage. This special position promoted the Irish language to a minimum level of proficiency (rather than to fluency) in a large number of people. Within this large number of people there are more than half a million people (i.e. about 16 per cent of the population) who can speak Irish well beyond a minimum level of fluency, and many (perhaps most) of them learned Irish at school. Individuals who achieved high grades at school in all their subjects (including Irish for most of them) are quite likely to gain employment in “good” positions such as the PMT jobs discussed by Borooah *et al.* (2009). In many cases cultural capital (which may include Irish) paved the way through the education system and into such employment. In the past there may have been an advantage in having at least a minimum proficiency in Irish for recruitment to and promotion within the civil service. Since the 1970s, however, this advantage has been removed. Today, gaining a prestigious PMT position does not indicate that the candidate (for employment or promotion) has any proficiency in the Irish language. Rather, employees in such positions have much educational capital, which may include some level of proficiency in the Irish language.<sup>18</sup>

Social elites in Ireland have been able to exploit the resources of education to reproduce their advantage from generation to generation. The Irish language has been an element of these resources. It is not a resource which is restricted to Irish speakers. Rather than Irish speakers having an advantage, people with a cultural capital advantage accumulate more cultural capital such as the Irish language. This is most likely institutionalised cultural capital, which is a form of cultural capital based on institutional recognition such as academic qualifications. Bourdieu (1983) argued that:

By conferring institutional recognition on the cultural capital possessed by any given agent, the academic qualification ... makes it possible to establish conversion rates between cultural capital and economic capital by guaranteeing the monetary value of a given academic capital. (p. 190)

In contrast to the social elites who have been able to exploit the resources of the education system, such as the Irish language, there is the unfortunate example of emigration from *Gaeltacht* communities. During the 1950s as many as two out of every three native Irish speakers, many with a poor

<sup>17</sup> See An Coimisinéir Teanga’s (Language Commissioner) 2005 *Annual Report* ([www.coimisineir.ie/downloads/Tuarascail\\_Bhliantuil\\_2005\\_4MB.pdf](http://www.coimisineir.ie/downloads/Tuarascail_Bhliantuil_2005_4MB.pdf)) in which he states that Government Departments have not been applying bonus marks for Irish in applications for promotion.

<sup>18</sup> There are few positions requiring fluency in Irish, but they have increased in number in recent years (as a result of the granting of official status to the Irish language in the EU from 2007; the Official Languages Act 2003; and the Irish language television station (TG4) which began broadcasting in 1996).

command of English were forced to leave the *Gaeltacht* for England or America. Then in 1971 the Minister for the Gaeltacht launched an industrialisation initiative to stem the tide of emigration from the *Gaeltacht*. The emigration continued, however, as young under-qualified people from the *Gaeltacht* continued to emigrate.

Despite all the rhetoric about gaelicising the whole country and Irish being the first official language of the state, there were few opportunities available to the native Irish speaker from Conamara or from West Kerry or from North West Donegal, unless they could speak English with the fluency of a native English speaker. ([anghaeltacht.net/ctg/altveritas.htm](http://anghaeltacht.net/ctg/altveritas.htm) – first published in Ó hÉallaithe (2004).)

#### IV CONCLUSION

We welcome the work done by Borooah *et al.* (2009) on the advantage which Irish speakers appear to have in the labour market. However, we argue that the advantage is held by a so-called “middle-class” elite, which is more likely (to claim) to speak Irish, rather than by an Irish-speaking elite. The educational advantages, to which Borooah *et al.* (2009) referred, rather than being the preserve of an Irish-speaking community, network or elite, are acquired mainly by the children of non-Irish-speaking parents. We contend that further empirical research employing the theoretical concept of cultural capital could advance understanding of the interesting intersection of social advantage and the Irish language.

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