

An Ghaeilge: Stair & Stádas **The Irish Language: History & Status¹**

Irish is a Celtic language, as is Scottish Gaelic, Manx Gaelic (Manx), Welsh, Breton and Cornish. The Gaelic languages come from Old Irish and the other three Celtic languages come from British. There were other Celtic languages spoken on the European Mainland, but they died out around 1,500 years ago. The Celtic languages are believed to have come from Common Celtic, which came from Indo-European itself.

We cannot be certain when Irish first came to Ireland, but many scholars believe that it was here over 2,500 years ago. It is certain that there were other languages spoken here before Irish but, by the start of the Christian era, Irish was spoken all over Ireland and was spreading through Scotland, the west coast of Britain and the Isle of Mann. The Romans called the Gaels Scotti and they eventually spread the Gaelic language throughout most of Scotland. The oldest remains of Ancient Irish that we have are inscriptions on Ogham stones from the 5th and 6th centuries. Old Irish was first written in the Roman alphabet before the beginning of the 7th century which makes Irish the oldest written vernacular language north of the Alps.

During the Middle Irish period (900-1200 AD) some loanwords came from the Scandinavian language, words like 'pingin' (penny), and 'margadh' (market), but Scandinavian had little effect on the syntax of the Irish language. This was a period of strife and conflict but, despite that, the Gaelic literary culture never failed and we have many manuscripts that survive from the Middle Irish era. The Anglo Normans began settling in Scotland at the end of the eleventh century and in Ireland in the last third of the twelfth century. The Anglo Norman conquest started a period of multilingualism in Ireland, but Irish remained in the ascendancy and, gradually, the Normans began to speak Irish. By the start of the sixteenth century most of the people of Ireland were Irish speakers again. Among the words that the Anglo Normans introduced into Irish are 'giúistís' (justice), 'bardas' (corporation), 'cúirt' (court), 'garsún' (boy), and many, many more.

1200-1600 are the dates of Classical Modern Irish. This was not the ordinary speech of the period but a cultivated standardized language developed in the lay schools for scholars and poets throughout Ireland and Scotland. The spoken language of the same period is called Early Modern Irish, but the speech of the people underwent many changes from the start to the end of this period. Although the majority of the people had Irish, English, however, was necessary for administrative and legal affairs. Irish, therefore, never became an administrative language, and the Irish speaking community never achieved political independence again.

The status of Irish as a major language was lost. But Irish continued as the language of the greater part of the rural population and, for a time, of the working classes in towns. From the middle of the eighteenth century, as the penal laws were relaxed, and a greater social and economic mobility became possible for the native Irish, the more prosperous members of the Irish-speaking

¹ Féach | See: <http://www.udaras.ie/en/an-ghaeilge-an-ghaeltacht/stair-na-gaeilge/>

community began to adopt an Anglicized way of life and to take up English. This increased during and after the Great Famine (1846–1848). The language was on the point of extinction.

At the start of the eighteenth century scholars started to become interested in the language and in its literature. Many people understood that Spoken Irish was declining. Thomas Davis, in 1843, was among those who publicly declared that Irish is a “national language”. This terminology was again used in the constitutions of 1922 and 1937. The Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, which was established in 1876, managed to gain recognition for Irish at every level of the education system from primary school level to university. In the year 1893 Dubhghlas de hÍde, Eoin Mac Néill, Father Eoghan Ó Gramhnaigh and others established Conradh na Gaeilge, or the Gaelic League. Within a couple of years they managed to create a mass movement of support for the Irish language. A start was made to bringing the grammar of the written language into line with the spoken modern language. A result of these efforts was the Official Standard which the Government of Ireland published in 1958.

The image of the Irish language has changed a great deal in recent years, which is evident by the number of people who speak and learn the language, not only in Ireland but around the world. The Irish language is the language of the community in Gaeltacht regions and the language is also gaining strength in places outside the Gaeltacht. According to the Census of 2006, 1.66 million people in the Republic of Ireland can speak Irish, compared with 1.57 in 2002. According to the 2001 Census in the North of Ireland 10.4% claim to have some knowledge of Irish. Surveys have long shown a deep affection towards the Irish language amongst the community all over the country and this is not confined to people who speak Irish.

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Tá an Ghaeilge ar cheann de na teangacha scríofa is sine agus is stairiúla ar domhan. Chonacthas í den chéad uair i bhfoirm Oghaim sa chúigiú haois. Sa lá atá inniu ann is féidir teacht uirthi i suas le 4,500 leabhar, ar an teilifís, ar an raidió, i nuachtáin, in irisí, agus ar an idirlíon.

Is teanga Cheilteach í an Ghaeilge, chomh maith le Gaeilge na hAlban, Gaeilge Oileán Mhanann (an Mhanainnis), An Bhreatnais, an Bhriotóinis agus an Choirnis. Síolraíonn na teangacha Gaelacha ón tSean-Ghaeilge agus síolraíonn na trí theanga Cheilteacha eile ón Bhriotainis. Bhíodh teangach Ceilteacha eile á labhairt ar Mhór-Roinn na hEorpa ach chuaigh siad i léig timpeall míle go leith bliain ó shin. Is cosúil gur shíolraigh na teangacha Ceilteacha go léir ón Chomh-Cheiltis agus gur shíolraigh sí sin ón Ind-Eorpais féin.

Ní féidir bheith cinnte cén uair a tháinig an Ghaeilge go hÉirinn ach measann a lán scoláirí go bhfuil sí anseo le 2,500 bliain. Is cinnte go raibh teangacha eile in Éirinn roimpi ach, faoi thús ré na Críostaíochta, bhí an Ghaeilge á labhairt ar fud na hÉireann agus ag leathnú trí Albain, cósta thiar na Breataine agus Oileán

² Féach | See: <http://www.udaras.ie/an-ghaeilge-an-ghaeltacht/stair-na-gaeilge/>

Mhanann. Scotti a thug na Rómhanaigh ar na Gaeil agus leathnaigh siad a dteanga tríd an chuid is mó d'Albain.

Is iad na hiarsmaí is sine dá bhfuil againn den Ghaeilge Ársa ná inscríbhinní ar chlocha Oghaim ón 5ú agus ón 6ú haois. Cuireadh tús le scríobh na Sean-Ghaeilge san aibítir Rómhanach roimh thús an 7ú haois. Is í an Ghaeilge, mar sin, an teanga scríofa is sine dá bhfuil fós á labhairt lastuaidh de na hAlpa.

I rith thréimhse na Meán-Ghaeilge (900-1200 AD) fuarthas roinnt iasachtaí ón Lochlainnis, focail nua ar nós 'pingin' agus 'margadh', ach is beag tionchar a bhí ag an Lochlainnis ar chomhréir na Ghaeilge. Treimhse cheannairce agus choimhlinte a bhí ann ach, ina aineoinn sin, níor theip ar chultúr liteartha na nGael agus tá scríbhinní iomadúla ar marthain ó ré na Meán-Ghaeilge.

Thosaigh na hAngla-Normannaigh ag lonnú in Albain i ndeireadh an aonú céad déag, agus in Éirinn sa trian deiridh den dara céad déag. Chuir gabhálas na nAngla-Normannach tús le tréimhse ilteangachais in Éirinn, ach d'fhan an Ghaeilge in uachtar agus, de réir a chéile, thosaigh na Normannaigh ag labhairt Gaeilge. Faoi thús an tséú céad déag, ba chainteoirí Gaeilge formhór mór phobal na hÉireann arís. Ar chuid de na focail a thug na hAngla-Normannaigh isteach sa Ghaeilge tá 'giúistís', 'bardas', 'cúirt', 'garsún', agus a lán lán eile.

1200-1600 dátaí thréimhse na Nua-Ghaeilge Clasaicí. Ní gnáthchaint na linne a bhí ann ach teanga shaothraithe chaighdeánach a forbraíodh sna scoileanna oidhreachtúla do scoláirí agus d'fhill ar fud na hÉireann agus na hAlban. Tugtar an Nua-Ghaeilge Mhoch ar theanga labhartha na treimhse céanna, ach tháinig a lán athruithe ar chaint na ndaoine ó thús deireadh na tréimhse seo.

In ainneoin go raibh Gaeilge ag formhór na ndaoine, bhí, áfach, Béarla ag teastáil le haghaidh gnóthaí riaracháin agus dlí. Tharla, mar sin, nach ndearnadh teanga riaracháin riamh den Ghaeilge, agus nár bhain pobal na Gaeilge neamhspleáchas polaitiúil amach choíche arís.

Bualadh buillí troma ar an Ghaeilge le linn an tséú agus an tseachtú haois déag. De thoradh ar choncas agus ar phlandáil na dTiúadóireach agus na Stiobhardach (1534–1610), plandáil Chromail (1654), Cogadh an Dá Rí (1689-91) agus achtú na bPéindlíthe (1695) a lean sin, bhí aicmí ceannais phobal na Gaeilge go hiomlán ar lár agus bhí a gcuid institiúidí cultúrtha scriosta.

Bhí stádas na Gaeilge mar mhórtheanga caillte. Ach ba í an Ghaeilge teanga fhormhór phobal na tuaithe i gcónaí agus, go ceann thréimhse, ag an lucht oibre sna bailte. Ó lár an ochtú céad déag, de réir mar a bhí maolú ag teacht ar na péindlíthe, agus méadú ar dheiseanna sóisialta agus eacnamaíochta ag an seanphobal Gaelach, thosaigh an chuid ba rafaire orthu ag tiontú ar ghnás na meánaicme galla agus an Béarla a tharraingt chucu féin. Chuaigh an nós seo i dtreise le linn agus i ndiaidh an Ghorta Mhóir (1846-1848). Bhí an teanga i mbéal an bháis.

I dtús an ochtú haois déag, thosaigh an lucht léinn ag cur spéise sa teanga agus ina litríocht. Thuig a lán daoine go raibh an Ghaeilge labhartha ag meath. Bhí Tomás Dáibhís, sa bhliain 1843, ar dhuine de na daoine a dhearbhaigh go poiblí gur 'teanga náisiúnta' í an Ghaeilge. Baineadh leas as an téarmaíocht seo arís i mBunreachtá 1922 agus 1937. D'éirigh le Cumann Buan-Choimeádta na Gaeilge, a

bunaíodh sa bhliain 1876, aitheantas a ghnóthú don Ghaeilge ar gach leibhéal den chóras oideachais ón bhunscolaíocht go dtí an ollscolaíocht. Sa bhliain 1893, bhunaigh Dubhghlas de hÍde, Eoin Mac Néill, an tAthair Eoghan Ó Gramhnaigh, agus daoine eile, Conradh na Gaeilge. Laistigh de cúpla bliain d'éirigh leo mórghluaiseacht tacaíochta ar son na Gaeilge a chruthú. Tosaíodh ar litriú agus ar ghramadach na teanga scríofa a thabhairt chun réitigh leis an nuatheanga labhartha. Bhí de thoradh ar na hiarrachtaí sin an Caighdeán Oifigiúil a d'fhoilsigh Rialtas na hÉireann sa bhliain 1958.

Tá athrú suntasach tar éis teacht ar íomhá na Gaeilge le blianta beaga anuas. Tá sé seo le sonrú ar líon na ndaoine atá á labhairt agus á foghlaim ní hamháin in Éirinn ach ar fud na cruinne. Labhraítear an Ghaeilge mar theanga an phobail i gceantair Ghaeltachta in Éirinn agus tá an Ghaeilge ag bailiú nirt lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht chomh maith. De réir Dhaonáireamh 2006, tá sé ar a gcumas ag 1.66 milliún duine i bPoblacht na hÉireann an Ghaeilge a labhairt i gcomparáid le 1.57 milliún i 2002 agus léirigh 10.4% go raibh eolas éigin acu ar an nGaeilge ó thuaidh de réir fhigiúirí Dhaonáireamh 2001. Léiríonn suirbhéanna le tamall fada go bhfuil an-bhá i measc an phobail i dtaobh na teanga ar fud an oileáin agus nach bhfuil an bhá sin teoranta do lucht labhartha na teanga amháin.