

Language Contact and Language Politics in Ireland: Linguistic Landscapes in South Dublin

Journal Article

Marion Schulte

This paper describes the language contact situation in the Republic of Ireland with particular focus on English and Irish, and the current language policies that encourage the use of these official languages. Data from regular censuses in Ireland are linked to a case study of linguistic landscapes in two South Dublin neighborhoods to reveal to what extent English, Irish, and other languages are present in public spaces in Ireland's capital. These results are compared to the attitudes regarding English and Irish held by members of the community in South Dublin, which are based on semi-guided interviews with young Dubliners from these neighbourhoods.

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1. Introduction

The Republic of Ireland is a bilingual state – both Irish and English are the official languages according to the Irish constitution. Irish is, however, a minority language in Ireland. English is the language that is commonly spoken by the vast majority of the population in all domains of public and private life. The Irish state encourages the use of Irish through a variety of language policies (e.g., Gaeltacht Act 2012, Official Languages Act 2003) and aims to increase the number of people who are proficient in Irish and also use the Irish language in their daily lives.

Regular censuses in Ireland offer valuable insights into the perceived linguistic proficiency and also to an extent into the use of the Irish language. Some data on other languages are also generated by the census questionnaires, but these are largely limited to which languages are being spoken in the home and to the English language proficiency of persons who claim to speak another language in private. As census data rely on self-reports of the participants, they are problematic when assessing actual language usage. Linguistic landscapes, how-

ever, can contribute to a better understanding of the languages used in the public sphere. In a state with an explicit language policy that heavily promotes bilingualism, it is particularly interesting to analyse how the two official languages are used in every-day life and how this relates to the use of other languages in public spaces.

This paper presents a case study of the linguistic landscape created by publicly displayed signs in two areas of the capital city, Dublin: Dundrum and Stillorgan. In the first two sections the history of the contact situation between English and Irish as well as the current linguistic policies in the Republic of Ireland are briefly laid out. A discussion of linguistic landscaping as a technique to gather data, especially in multilingual contexts, follows before the study itself is presented. The results of this study are then compared to the reported language use and language attitudes of South Dublin informants. This discussion is based on semi-guided interviews conducted in the area.

2. English and Irish Language Contact in Ireland

Irish and English have been spoken in the island of Ireland for hundreds of years – Irish

was spoken throughout the island when the Anglo-Normans arrived in the 12th century and brought English, among other languages, with them. Throughout the middle ages, Irish remained the majority language; the use of English only significantly increased in the Early Modern period, and even then not in all parts of Ireland. In the east of Ireland, especially in the area around Dublin known as the Pale, English was much more common than in the west, where Irish dominated (cf., for example, Crowley 2000: 12ff; Hickey 2007: 30ff). The remnants of this distribution can still be seen today: current census figures reveal that the percentage of Irish speakers is much higher in the western counties, especially in rural areas, than in the east (CSO, Census 2011). Especially during the 19th century, Irish speakers increasingly used English without maintaining the Irish language and/or passing it on to the next generation. A number of factors contributed to this decline of Irish as a community language, among them the favouring of English in the education system (cf. the remarks in Grillo 2009: 97-102), the perceived advantage of English language skills in the labour market of the British Empire, and the resulting higher prestige of English. The Irish Famine of the 1840s and 1850s is also

often seen as the event that finally cemented the extinction of Irish as a commonly spoken language in Ireland (cf. Doyle 2015: 124ff). Especially the rural population in the traditionally Irish-speaking areas in the west were affected by the famine, and 2.5 million people died or emigrated in its wake (cf. Ó Riagáin 1997: 4-5). The search for reasons for the language shift from Irish to English is often coloured by different ideologies. As Grillo (2009: 100) remarks, “it is easier to blame the decline of Irish in the nineteenth century on the education system (as did Douglas Hyde, for example), or the Catholic Church, or Daniel O’Connell, than accept that for many people English represented the only ‘rational’ choice in their economic and social circumstances”.

Language contact between Irish and English is, in fact, closely intertwined with the political situation in Ireland. English arrived as the language of an occupying force from the outside and language use and ethnicity were closely connected in medieval Ireland, as Arne Peters’ article in this journal shows very vividly. Crucially, the distinction between Irish and English was not just made by the native Irish population, but also by the English powers. With the Statutes of Kilkenny (Hardiman: Article 3) they tried to

compel their countrymen living in Ireland to use English rather than Irish and dress and behave according to the English fashion; thus proving that the people were doing exactly the opposite – namely assimilating to the Irish. After the Tudors and Stuarts started a policy of plantations in the 16th and 17th centuries, and “legislation was passed against the use of Irish within areas of English rule” (Crowley 2000: 19), the use of English became more prestigious and widespread especially from the 17th century onwards. The perception of the Celtic languages spoken in the British Isles in general became more and more negative. Grillo points out that “[t]he climate of opinion in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was thus hostile to the languages and cultures of inhabitants of the Celtic fringe, seeing them as ‘barbarous’, dangerous, and in the case of Ireland and the Highlands, priest-ridden [...]” (Grillo 2009: 89). By the 19th century, Irish was seen by many as an obstacle to economic success and as a language spoken by the rural poor (cf. Ó Riagáin 1997: 5ff).

The language revival movement that began in the late 19th century was closely associated with the nationalist movement and the fight for Irish independence. The

Irish language became a strong source of Irish identity that was unique to the Irish and thus served to distinguish them as a people, and as a nation, from the British. Following Irish independence in 1922, the revival of the Irish language was strongly supported by the Irish state. The following section will lay out how this official support has continued until the present day and which measures are currently taken to achieve both increased speaker numbers and higher proficiency levels of Irish among the Irish population.

3. Current Language Policy and Language Use in Ireland

Article 8 (§§2,3) of the Irish constitution states that “[t]he Irish language as the national language is the first official language” and “[t]he English language is recognised as a second official language” (Constitution of Ireland 2012). Both languages may be used when dealing with government bodies, and official texts are usually produced in both languages. Irish has primacy over English in certain contexts, however. Whenever there is a conflict between the Irish and English versions of

official documents, for example, “the text in the national language shall prevail” (Constitution of Ireland 2012, Article 25 §6).

The state does not only grant official status to Irish and English, it also actively promotes the use of the Irish language through various policies. In spite of its official status, Irish is a minority language in most parts of the country (see below), and the Irish state aims to increase the number of people who use Irish daily, especially outside of the education system. In order to achieve this, a number of strategic documents have been published (e.g., Gaeltacht Act 2012, Official Languages Act 2003) that should ensure an increased quality and extent of Irish language services, especially regarding public institutions, and a variety of organisations and projects are funded that promote the status and use of the Irish language. Irish is particularly strongly supported in the education system. Both English and Irish are compulsory subjects in primary and secondary schools for the vast majority of pupils, which leads to the high figures of Irish language use within the education system that are reported in the censuses (see below). While most schools teach subjects other than Irish or foreign languages through English, Irish-medium

schools also exist all over the country. A particularly good example for the state support for Irish within the education system is the availability of extra points for students who take their leaving certificate exams through Irish rather than English. In spite of such efforts by the Irish state to increase the knowledge and use of Irish, Ó Laoire (2008: 195) points out that the role of the English language, and any other languages that are also spoken in Ireland, is largely ignored when it comes to official language policies.

The extent of use of Irish is documented in regular censuses that are created every 5 years. As part of each census, residents over the age of 3 are asked to self-report whether they can speak Irish. Those who respond positively are then asked how often they use the language and whether they use it inside or outside of the education system. In 2011, 1,774,437 persons, or 41% of the population, stated they could speak Irish (CSO, Census 2011, Table 32). Almost a third of these persons claim to use Irish exclusively within the education system and another quarter never use the language. Only 158,686 persons, equalling 9% of Irish speakers, and 4% of the total population, use Irish daily or

weekly outside of the education system (CSO, Census 2011, Table 33A).

The knowledge and extent of use of Irish differs considerably between different areas in Ireland. South Dublin and Dublin City are the districts with the lowest percentage of Irish speakers, while Galway County reports the largest percentage (CSO, *What we know*: 26). This is not surprising, as some of the well-known Gaeltacht areas, locations where Irish is commonly spoken as an every-day language, are located in County Galway. Other rural counties, for example Clare or North Tipperary, have similarly high percentages of Irish speakers, however.

The most frequently spoken language other than English or Irish is Polish, which is spoken by 119,526 persons (CSO, Census 2011, Table 25), or almost 3% of the total population. Other immigrant languages are far less common than Polish, but 514,068 persons (CSO, Census 2011, Table 25), or 11% of the population, report that they speak a language other than English or Irish at home. The largest percentages of non-Irish nationals live in Galway City, Fingal, and Dublin City in 2011. South Dublin has the fifth highest percentage of non-Irish nationals. Nationality can, of course, not be equated with language use, but a high percentage

of immigrants in Dublin justifies the hypothesis that languages other than English and Irish can be found as part of the linguistic landscape of the city. Kallen (2010) does indeed find signage in a number of immigrant languages, but only in certain parts of the area he investigates.

Bilingualism in English and Irish is strongly supported and fostered in Ireland, but other languages do not enjoy similar official recognition or support. With regards to the linguistic landscape we can thus expect bilingual signage especially in the official domain, which includes, for example, street signs and road signage. As knowledge of Irish is relatively low in South Dublin, signs displayed by businesses or private persons may not utilise the Irish language as frequently. Kallen (2009) has, however, pointed out that Irish-looking fonts are often used to allude to the language and to serve a symbolic function. Such signs may well be found in South Dublin. Languages other than English or Irish are part of the linguistic landscape of Dublin city (cf. Kallen 2010), and can be expected to be found in South Dublin as well.

4. Linguistic Landscapes

Linguistic landscapes can be employed to investigate the written language used in an area by analysing the language(s) featured on publicly displayed signage. This includes, for example, road signs, street names, advertisements, or private and public notices. Linguistic landscapes have often been created to investigate language use in multilingual contexts (e.g., Cenoz & Gorter 2006; Kallen 2014; Schuster 2012). They offer insights into the actual language use in a community, not only into the language use that is self-reported by speakers in censuses or interviews and can be seen as reflections of “the relative power and status of the different languages in a specific sociolinguistic context” (Cenoz & Gorter 2006: 67). Linguistic landscapes are, however, not a mere reflection of the relation of languages or codes, but also influence speakers’ perceptions of this relation and thus contribute to the construction of the linguistic identity of a community. Landry & Bourhis (1997) link the informational and symbolic functions of public signage to considerations of ethnolinguistic vitality, and Coupland (2012: 4) claims that “visible bilingualism” is not

only “a correlate of, but a [...] stylization of, ethnolinguistic vitality”. Kallen (2014) concludes a study of the linguistic landscape in the border area between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland by saying that an analysis of the linguistic landscape “offers a unique insight into questions of language and identity” (2014: 167).

But linguistic landscapes also have significant drawbacks that have to be considered. They do not provide information on language use in the private sphere, and they are not suitable to explore oral language. They also offer only a momentary glimpse into language use and are therefore not a particularly reliable and objective method for gathering data. In spite of these disadvantages, linguistic landscapes can be a valuable tool for gathering data, especially in multilingual contexts, in addition to other methods like, for example, interviews with members of a community.

Previously, linguistic landscaping in Ireland has yielded valuable insights regarding the use of Irish, English and other languages. Kallen (2010) investigates the linguistic landscape in Dublin by recording public signage in a relatively large area, a 5km long stretch, from Malahide Road in the north of the city via selected streets in the

city centre. He emphasises the different domains public signs belong to, the different discourse functions these domains have, and the ways in which all of these domains form a layered linguistic landscape. Signage in the civic domain, like street signs, is, for example, mostly bilingual in Ireland, due to the linguistic policy of the state, and these signs are only installed by an official body. Signs put up by local businesses, on the other hand, are largely monolingual English signs, at least in Dublin. But his survey also reveals the use of “other languages finding a niche” (Kallen 2010: 46), for example Polish and Chinese. These languages are often found in a discourse frame which Kallen calls the ‘marketplace’, where they are added to English, and sometimes Irish, signage. The emphasis Kallen puts on the different domains of language use is an important point to consider in the analysis of the linguistic landscape, as each of these domains “has its own set of discourse expectations” (Kallen 2010: 55). Street signs can thus generally be expected to be bilingual, while local businesses are probably going to favour monolingual English signage. Kallen stresses the discourse nature of the linguistic landscape and the fact that the different discourses and domains overlap each other

in a variety of ways (see also Kallen 2009). He also emphasises the choices a linguistic community has in using language on public signage. These choices are not limited to the language that is used, but also incorporate code choices like fonts or audience choices (cf. Kallen 2009: 277; also see Domke 2015). A Celtic-style font can, for example, “index Irishness” (Kallen 2009: 279) even when the language used is English. This indexation can be useful in a context where the use of the Irish language would impede communication, for instance when a sign is addressed at tourists who cannot be expected to know Irish.

4.1 A Case Study in South Dublin

Linguistic landscaping will be used here to investigate the use of the two official languages of the Republic of Ireland, Irish and English, in parts of the capital, Dublin. Rather than comparing areas influenced by extensive tourism (cf. Kallen 2009), or regions that are shaped by different language policies (cf. Kallen 2014), I will focus on two shopping areas in South Dublin that fall within the same jurisdiction and are not particularly affected by tourism. The

questions addressed here are how Irish, English, and possibly other languages are represented on public signage in two specific and small locations, and what this can tell us about the linguistic community in these areas. The data were collected in early 2016.

The neighbourhoods around Dundrum Shopping Centre and Stillorgan Village are frequented by a large number of people, but are not necessarily places of interest for tourists coming to Ireland. In both places, data was gathered by walking on the footpath in the vicinity of the shopping centres. Figure 1 shows a map of Dublin; the locations of the two research sites in Stillorgan and Dundrum are marked.

The investigated areas themselves are rather small – in Dundrum, data was gathered on Main Street on a 350m long stretch, and in Stillorgan, the signage was recorded over 260m on Lower Kilmacud Road. Differently from many other studies of the linguistic landscape in Ireland and elsewhere, all written language on stationary objects that was visible from the footpath was recorded and classified. This includes, for example, window displays and street signs, but excludes signs on moving vehicles. Window displays that contain more than one sign are counted as a single unit, and every

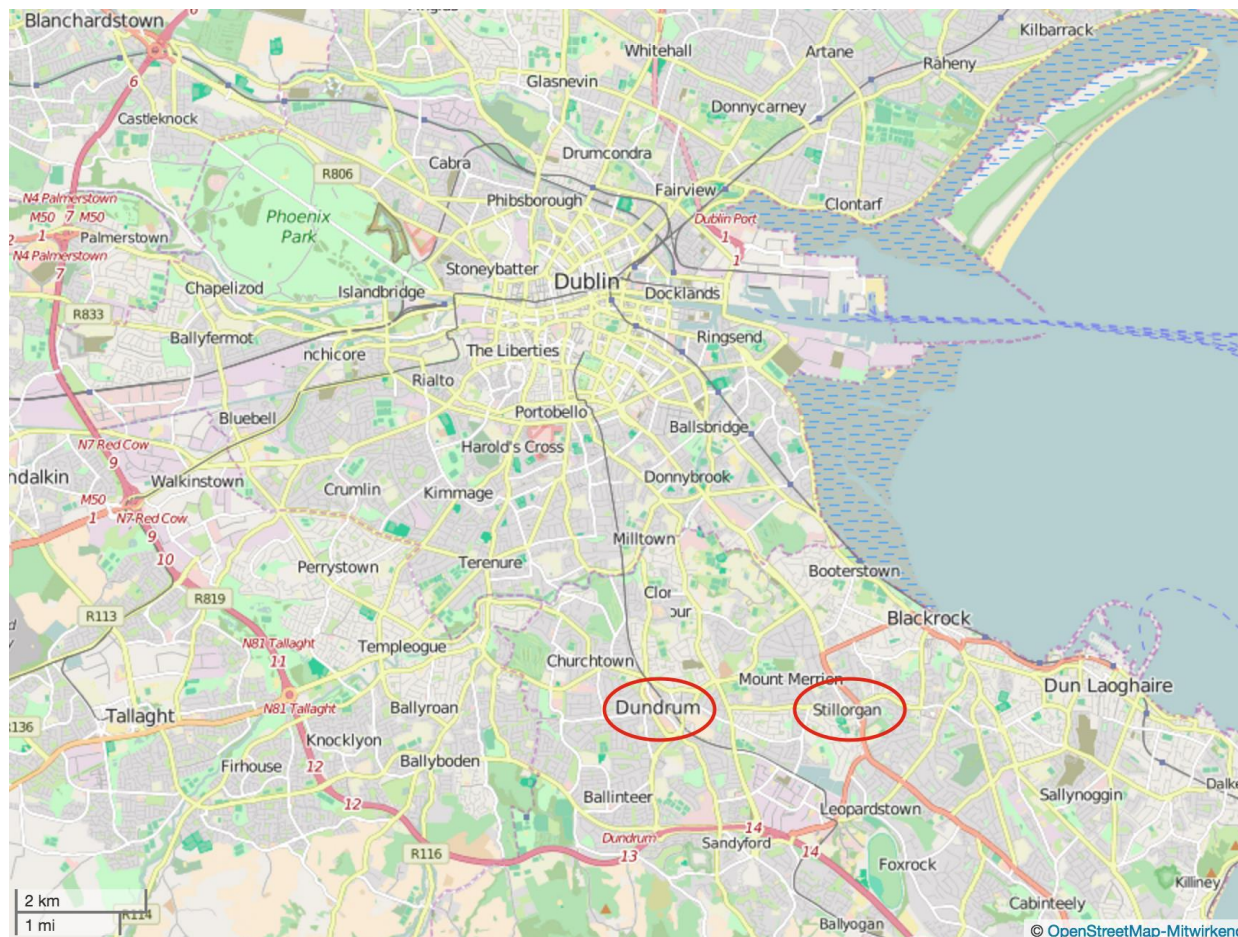


Figure 1 Map of Dublin (OpenStreetMap 2016)

instance of language use was classified according to the language it was written in: Irish only, both Irish and English, English only, another language or combination of

languages. Table 1 shows the number of times each of these categories was encountered.

| | Irish only | Irish & English | English only | other languages |
|------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|
| DUNDRUM | 0 | 12 | 78 | 0 |
| STILLORGAN | 1 | 4 | 57 | 1 |

Table 1 Number of Signs in Irish, Irish & English, English, and Other Languages

In both locations, the overwhelming majority of signs are written in English only. A small number is written in both English and Irish, but only one sign in Stillorgan is written in Irish only. Also in Stillorgan, the Latin inscription “Deo Gratias” is the only sign in another language. It is clear from this distribution that public language use is heavily in favour of English-only-signage in both Dundrum and Stillorgan.

Quantitative information based on linguistic landscapes should be treated with care because each of the shop windows one encounters contains multiple signs, and thus multiple instances of language use, but the number of these signs differs enormously between individual shops. Official signs like road signs also often occur multiple times. For this investigation, each type of sign was counted, but the frequency with which this type occurs is not taken into account. We are therefore looking at type rather than token frequency.

An analysis of the signs emphasizes the importance of English even more than a simple counting of instances of language use. Let us consider the Irish and bilingual signs first. A closure for water services on the footpath in Stillorgan has the Irish word for water, *uisce*, written on it. Similar, slightly larger, versions of this closure lid could be found as well, and these have both the Irish and English word written on them. All of the bilingual signs in Stillorgan are in fact related to public services. Apart from the covers for services on the footpath, there is also a rubbish bin with both English and Irish writing on it (Figure 2) and glass recycling containers with bilingual labels. The English writing on the lid of rubbish bin reads “No hot ashes please”. This is ingrained in the lid itself and has probably been added during the production of the lid. The Irish phrase “Ó chuan go sliabh” (‘from harbour to mountain’) and the coat of arms are symbols of County Dún Laoghaire – Rathdown, the local authority. Similar bins on the same stretch of road do not show such markings, and it is not clear whether this coat of arms was added by an official authority; it could, for example, have been added to all rubbish bins distri-

buted at a certain time, or by the owner of the bin, maybe to express their identification with the local county.



Figure 2 Rubbish Bin in Stillorgan, Bilingual Irish/English

The recycling containers are interesting, because a number of recycling containers with new bilingual labels stand next to containers with older labels that are written

in English. The photos in Figures 3 and 4 provide examples for both types. The fact that older monolingual labels were covered with bilingual signage could suggest a changing attitude in favour of bilingualism, but the overall paucity of bilingual signs does not support such an assessment. It is also possible that new bilingual signs are added due to the provisions of the Official Languages Act (2003), which requires public bodies to provide services in Irish where those are not yet available.

Figure 3 Glass Recycling Container in Stillorgan, Monolingual English



Figure 4 Glass Recycling Container in Stillorgan, Bilingual English/Irish



In Dundrum, monolingual signs in Irish could not be found, but this location has a larger number of bilingual signs. A third of these bilingual signs could be found at the tram stop. Signposts and general information is sometimes displayed in both languages, but there are also monolingual English signs to be found here. The photo in Figure 5 provides an example for both kinds of signs.

Bilingual signs on Main Street itself are signposts, a Dublin Bus stop, and some parking signs. The parking ticket machine and an e-car point, where owners of electric cars can charge their vehicles, also contain both English and Irish writing, although most

of the writing on these is in English. Some private institutions, a bank, a credit union, and a college of further education, also display bilingual signage. More than half of the bilingual signs in Dundrum are put up by official services or institutions like the Luas, the name of the tram service in Dublin, which is also the Irish word for *speed*, and Dublin Bus. Only a small number of private companies or persons display bilingual signs.



Figure 5 Bilingual and Monolingual Signs at Dundrum Luas Stop

In both locations, a large part of the bilingual signs can therefore be attributed to official services rather than to private enterprises or persons. Not all of the official signage is

bilingual, however. In Stillorgan, we find council site notices, warning signs on electricity service boxes (Figure 6), writings on the road itself (Figure 7) and information displayed at a bus stop among the monolingual English signs.



Figure 6 Warning Sign on Electricity Service Box in Stillorgan, Monolingual English

In Dundrum, warning signs, road markings (Figure 8), signposts to the local county council office, and information at the tram stop are displayed in English only.



Figure 7 Road Markings in Stillorgan, Monolingual English



Figure 8 Road Markings in Dundrum, Monolingual English

In both locations, the overwhelming majority of advertisements, notices and all other signage is in English only. This includes the

window displays of supermarkets, solicitors, banks, estate agents, shops, take-aways, restaurants, doctors, and notices by homeowners and residents (Figure 9).



Figure 9 Missing Dog Sign in Stillorgan, Monolingual English

The language use documented here clearly shows a preference for monolingual English signage. Bilingual Irish/English signs are

relatively sparse, and the ones that exist are often put up by a governmental body or another official institution. Similar observations have, for example, been made by Kallen (2010), who also finds that signs in the civic domain are often bilingual, while signs in the marketplace domain are mostly written in English. In contrast to the areas he investigated, there are no signs in any language but English, however. The linguistic communities in Stillorgan and Dundrum thus do not seem to make use of any immigrant languages. Although South Dublin has a lower percentage of foreign inhabitants than other parts of Dublin (CSO, Profile 6: 10), speakers of languages other than English and Irish almost certainly frequent these shopping areas. The complete lack of any of these languages in the public space can therefore be seen as an active choice by the community as a whole. English is the only language necessary to navigate public spaces in the investigated areas and the linguistic community there constructs an English-only identity for itself. This identity contrasts with other areas of Ireland, where Irish is more prominent, and also other areas of Dublin, where immigrant languages are part of the linguistic landscape and Irish or Irish-inspired signage can be found as well.

It should be kept in mind, however, that this does not mean other languages, including Irish, are not spoken in Ireland. A linguistic landscape can help to shed light on the written language displayed in public spaces. People in these areas may well speak Irish, both in their homes and in public areas, but this is not recorded here. Signage in other areas in Ireland, especially, but not exclusively in the Gaeltacht, is also likely to be very different.

A comparison to interview data of South Dubliners, however, reveals that the scarcity of signage in languages other than English in the area coincides with the language attitudes and reported language use of participants.

5. Interviews with South Dubliners

Semi-guided interviews were conducted with young adults who attend either a secondary school or university in South Dublin in spring 2016. Many of the informants also lived in the area and might frequent one or both shopping areas investigated here. It should be kept in mind that the interviewees were not the same persons who set up signs in either of the two sites investigated here, but they were part of the

communities that create and perceive the written signs. Most of the interviewees were multilingual, although to different extents. Some had already spent time abroad, often with the aim of learning another language, and others were studying a foreign language. A number of participants had grown up bilingually, and spoke Russian, German, Spanish, or Irish as well as English at home. None of the participants spoke any language other than English and Irish outside of their family, with the exception of formal education situations or language tandems. While this was not further remarked upon by the participants, some did talk about their opinions to, and their knowledge and use of Irish.

Out of 16 participants, just one reported that they used Irish on a regular basis outside of an education context, which corresponds to the results of the 2011 census. All informants but one had attended or were attending primary and secondary schools in Ireland, and thus had knowledge of Irish, but not all of them expressed favourable opinions about the language. Most mentioned that they were unhappy with the way Irish was taught and/or the fact that it is a compulsory subject until the end of secondary school. All of the participants who

expressed negative attitudes to Irish stressed that the language is not used outside of the education sector. One participant said “I’m never gonna use Irish ever again in my life” (Interview 4) and another claimed that “once you leave the classroom you’re not gonna be speaking Irish” (Interview 3). Some participants said they would like to speak better Irish, but they were not willing to put in the effort to learn it. Participant 8 is a good example for this view: “It’d [Irish] be lovely to have, it’s just that I’d rather invest my time into learning something that would be more useful, like German, for my future than kind of spending time on a language I’ll never speak”.

Only two participants claimed they had a good knowledge of Irish, and both of these had very positive views of the language and of its importance in Ireland. One of them had been to the Gaeltacht twice, and another had attended an Irish-medium primary school. Both reported that either their friends or their family members also had positive attitudes to the language and that they could speak it well. In spite of this, neither informant used an extensive amount of Irish to communicate with their friends or family members. They would both use single words or “little comments like ‘Close the

door!’” (Interview 12), but would never speak Irish in “earnest conversations” (Interview 5). When asked why they do not use the language more, especially in an environment where everyone in their family is fluent in Irish, as is the case for the informant in Interview 12, they responded that it is a “complex issue” and that there is a “trend that most people now don’t speak Irish, so I guess then we don’t”.

The interviews reveal that only a small number of young people in South Dublin think they speak Irish well. This is surprising given the many years of formal education in Irish the participants have already completed. Many of them stress the teaching differences between Irish and other foreign languages like French or German, and they generally prefer the way those other foreign languages are taught. This may, of course, reveal more about their personal attitudes towards those languages than about the actual quality of foreign or second language teaching in their schools. However, it is obvious from these interviews that only a small minority of interviewees uses Irish at all. Even those who claim they are fluent or have a very good knowledge of the language do not speak it in their every-day lives. This confirms the impression gained from the

linguistic landscaping in South Dublin: While Irish is found on some official bilingual signage, it is hardly used by businesses or on private signs. The other languages spoken by the interviewees also do not feature in public signage in the areas investigated in South Dublin. As they did not claim to speak them outside of education context or their homes, this also corresponds to the language use reported by the participants.

6. Conclusion

This small case study of the linguistic landscape in two shopping areas in South Dublin has shown that English is heavily favoured on signage in the public sphere. This is true although the Republic of Ireland is a bilingual state and many languages apart from the official languages Irish and English are spoken there. Bilingual signage in the official languages largely remains a part of the civic domain, including road signs and official services, but, in spite of existing language policies, not even all of the signs in this domain are bilingual. Languages other than English or Irish do not form a significant part of the linguistic landscape in the investigated areas.

This is confirmed by a number of semi-guided interviews conducted with secondary school and university students from South Dublin. In spite of a high level of bi- and multilingualism among the interviewees, they do not report to speak any language apart from English outside of their homes, in the case of those who have grown up speaking more than one language, or education contexts. They are, of course, aware of the special status of Irish in Ireland and many of them remark upon that status and their own proficiency, or lack thereof, of Irish. Even those who speak Irish fluently do not use it regularly in conversations outside of their families or with close friends, and even then, they claim to use it only sporadically. Taken together, these results lead to the conclusion that the community in South Dublin constructs an English-only identity for itself, where languages other than English do not feature significantly in the public domain, and Irish is restricted to official contexts.

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