

The Irish Language

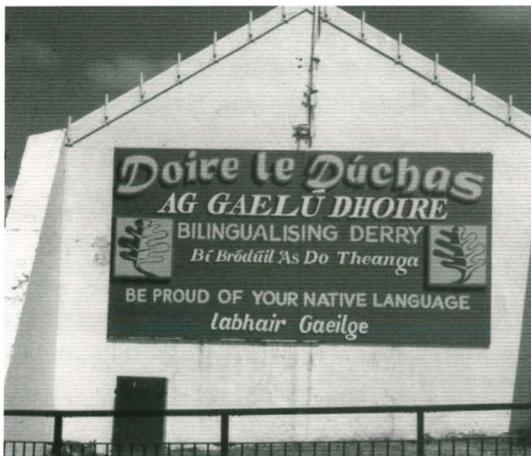
in Northern Ireland

Máiréad Nic Craith

Irish (also called Gaelic or Gaeilge na hÉireann) is an Indo-European language that has been spoken in Ireland for over 2,000 years. It is the language of some of the world's greatest poetry, legends, stories, and ballads, and it has an extensive written literature that dates back more than a thousand years.

Irish is one of six Celtic languages currently spoken in Western Europe. It is closely related to Scots-Gaelic (Scotland) and Manx (Isle of Man). Other Celtic languages include Welsh (Wales), Cornish (Cornwall), and Breton (Brittany, France). One of the national languages of the Republic of Ireland, Irish is spoken with particular passion in Northern Ireland. Since the seventeenth century, English has been widely used throughout Northern Ireland; however, the census of 2001 established that over ten percent of the population in the region had some skills in the Irish language.

In recent years, the British government has promised to support the language in Northern Ireland. The Good Friday, or Belfast, Agreement (1998) committed the government to “recognize the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity” of Irish and some other languages. Three years later, the British government placed Irish under the protection of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Of greatest significance has been the pledge in the St. Andrew's Agreement (2006) to introduce an Irish Language Act. Irish speakers are keen to maximize the opportunities this affords. In January 2007, Irish became an official working language of the European Union.



By Tír gan teanga,
tír gan anam—
A country without a language is
a country without a soul.
—Patrick H. Pearse

Associations such as Gaeloilúint and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta are involved in the successful provision of “Irish-medium education” (all subjects taught in the Irish language) in Northern Ireland. In January 2007, over 4,000 pupils in Northern Ireland were studying through Irish in 42 preschools, 32 primary schools, and 3 post-primary schools. The University of Ulster and Queen's University of Belfast offer courses in Irish and Celtic studies. The demand for Irish-medium education is increasing.

BBC Northern Ireland currently broadcasts radio programs in Irish, including *Blas* (which explores topical affairs) and *Caschlár* (a program of music from around the world). Raidió Fáilte, a community radio station, broadcasts with great success in West Belfast. Some Irish-speakers in Northern Ireland can also tune into RTÉ Radió na Gaeltachta, an Irish-language radio station from the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland has no dedicated Irish-language television service, but TG4, the Irish-language television channel from the Republic of Ireland, is widely available. In 2004, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland announced the establishment of an Irish Language Broadcast Fund, which supports Irish-language television production in Northern Ireland. *Lá*, an Irish-language newspaper, is published on a daily basis. There are a number of very useful Internet sources for Irish-speakers such as *Beo*.

A number of organizations, north and south of the border, are involved in the protection and enhancement of Irish at all levels of society. These include Conradh na Gaeilge, Foras na Gaeilge, Gael-Linn, Pobal, and ULTACH Trust. These dedicated organizations work to increase the profile of the language in all sectors and encourage bilingualism from an early age.

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A wall mural in Londonderry (Irish *Doire*) encourages the use of the Irish language. Photo by Ullrich Kockel