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## Attitudes of the non-Catholic population in Northern Ireland towards the Irish language in Ireland

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*Attitudes of the non-Catholic population in Northern Ireland  
towards the Irish Language in Ireland*

*Merike Darmody\**

*Abstract: Once holding a prominent position on the island, social, economic and political factors throughout the centuries have resulted in decline of the Irish language. The current situation of the Irish language on the island differs markedly between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. While historically the Irish language was used also by the representatives of other religions, over time it became strongly associated with Catholic identity. This paper explores the attitudes towards the use of the Irish language of adult non-Catholic population in Northern Ireland. It explores the link between language and national and religious identities, and seeks to identify factors associated with positive attitude towards the Irish language. The paper draws on 2013 Language Survey.*

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*Keyword(s): attitudes to the Irish language; fluency in Irish; future of the Irish language; national identity; religious identity.*

*JEL Codes:*

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## *Attitudes of the non-Catholic population towards the Irish language in Ireland*

*Over the years a considerable body of literature has built up on the situation of the Irish language on the island of Ireland. The Irish language is now a recognised minority language in Northern Ireland. A series of surveys have been carried out on social attitudes and behaviour of the general public, some of which also include questions on the usage of and attitudes to the Irish language (see DCAL, 2012; DCAL, 2014). Taken together, the surveys conducted show that in Northern Ireland people positively dispositioned towards the Irish language are mostly of Catholic backgrounds. Research by Darmody and Daly (2015) has shown that a significant proportion of the population in Northern Ireland holds neutral attitudes towards the language. Like Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, language socialization in Northern Ireland has changed radically over several decades from a home-based practice to a subject learned at school. However, the extent to which Irish is provided in schools in Northern Ireland remains limited. The Irish language is available as a subject in maintained Catholic and some integrated schools. A relatively small number schools operate through the medium of Irish. However, there has been increasing interest in all-Irish schools in recent years. Unlike in the Republic, there are no official Gaeltacht areas in Northern Ireland. Irish-speaking areas in the jurisdiction are very small, and due to demographic shifts and significant changes in language socialization patterns in these areas, the number of parents and grandparents who are able and willing to communicate with young children in Irish has declined rapidly. In addition, there are very few opportunities to practice the language in broader communities. Considering this, it is not surprising that only a very small number of adults in Northern Ireland have tried to improve their proficiency in Irish (see Darmody and Daly, 2015). Despite this, in recent years there have been attempts to promote the use of the Irish language (e.g. establishment of a Gaeltacht Quarter in Belfast and provision of Irish-medium nurseries and schools). However, the movements of language revitalisation are often relatively localised and tend to originate among people of middle-class background in urban contexts (Back, 1996).*

*The survival of lesser-used languages largely depends on their position in the society and public attitudes towards the language. If the language is seen as an important part of one's identity or a component of multiple identities, the individuals are more likely to speak it and be concerned about its survival. While several studies have established the link between positive language attitudes of the Catholic population in Northern Ireland, less is known about the attitudes of people with non-Catholic background and the extent to which they consider the language an important part of their identity. With this in mind, the paper endeavours to answer the following questions:*

*What is the current situation regarding the Irish language in Northern Ireland?*

*What is the attitude of the adult non-Catholic population towards the Irish language?*

*How is language attitude linked to religious background and national identity?*

## Theoretical background: language and identity

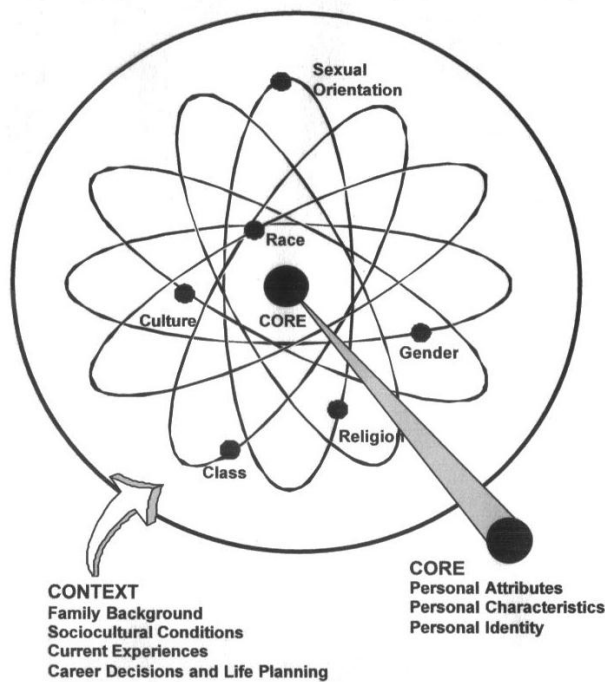
*This paper has taken identity as a theoretical starting point. Identity is the organization of self-understandings which define one's place in the world (Schwartz et al., 2005). These self-understandings include personality traits, beliefs, and values. Cote (2006) argues that the concept is being used in a multitude of ways and has thus become synonymous with culture, language, and in-group allegiances. The author concludes that the concept has a number of interpretations and no consensus exists on its precise definition. Woodward (1997) explains that identities are formed in relation to other identities. She indicates that the most common form of marking difference is by using binary oppositions, for example 'we and them', or 'self and other'.*

*Some authors suggest that individuals should be seen potentially holding multiple identities, in terms of religion/belief, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, and language (see Sen, 2006, on 'the fallacy of singular identity'). Different aspects of people's identity interact in complex ways with the ascriptive characteristics of social class and gender. Multiple identities are associated with specific social milieux. Young people's identity development is influenced by their experiences in the family, school and the wider community but the identities they present are also conditional on these domains as 'audiences' (Ross, 2007). No one identity is a priori or necessarily more central, self-defining, or true than any other (Burke et al., 2003, Jones & McEwen, 2000). The conceptual model developed by Jones and McEwen sees identity development as a fluid and dynamic process (see Figure 1 below).*

*The key categories represent themes and constructs that are interrelated and when integrated define the core category. Core category in this case being the contextual influences on the construction of identity and contextual influences included race, culture, gender, family, education, relationships with those different from oneself, and religion. The core category also reflects the finding that identity is defined and understood as having multiple intersecting dimensions.*

*Language use can be seen both as a social practice and as a symbolic system through which identity is created. It can be argued that the exposure at home, at school and in the wider community to a lesser-used language makes it easier to perceive it as an aspect of one's identity, alongside with other components such as religion or social class. Furthermore, it has been argued that language has no independent existence outside of its use, and that usage is social (Bakhtin, 1986). It follows that in order to revitalise and promote a lesser-used language; conditions must exist to practice it. In fact, it is as important to plan opportunities for using the language as it is to organise teaching of the language (Ó Riain, 1985). Finally, studies on politics of language (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) note that using language is a social and political practice in which an utterance's value and meaning was determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the person who speaks it. Language is seen to be closely associated with social class background – dominant usage is associated with dominant class (ibid.).*

FIGURE 1: MODEL OF MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY BY JONES & MCEWEN 2000



Source: Jones and McEwen (2000)

## Irish Language in Northern Ireland

Over the decades there has been continued interest in the position of the Irish language in Northern Ireland. The position of the Irish language in this jurisdiction is complex, often politically charged and has changed markedly over time. It has been argued that the revival of Irish language in Northern Ireland is to a large extent thanks to education, as the predominant profile of speakers is now second language rather than first language speakers (McKendry, 2014). It should be noted, however, that Irish is not provided in all schools and is more likely to be offered in the 'maintained' (Catholic) sector that provides for the Catholic community.

Irish-medium schools have emerged in Northern Ireland over the last 40 years, with a significant number of pupils attending Irish-medium nursery, primary and post-primary schools (McKendry, 2014; Nic Craith, 1999). In 2014 there were in total 1,580 schools in Northern Ireland: 836 primary, 208 post-primary and 536 other schools including special schools, nursery and pre-schools<sup>1</sup>. There are currently 29 Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland (2 % of all schools) and further ten Irish-medium units attached to English-medium host schools. Of the 29 Irish-medium schools, 28 are primary and one is post primary. Of the ten Irish-medium units attached to English-medium host schools, seven are primary and three are post-primary. There are a total of 5,256 pupils in Irish-

<sup>1</sup> Data from NISRA website: <http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/PivotGrid.aspx?ds=6327&lh=42&yn=2006-2014&sk=130&sn=Children%20Education%20and%20Skills&yearfilter=>

medium education in 2014/15 – two per cent of total pupil population of 317,595. This includes 885 children attending Irish-medium pre-school settings (10% of all 8,620 pupils), 3,458 primary school children (Years 1-7) (2% of all 175,040 pupils) and 913 in post-primary schools (Years 8-14)(0.6% of all 142,555 pupils). There are also 44 nurseries (naíscoileanna) catering for 1,251 pupils (21% of all 5,880 pupils)<sup>2</sup>. There are no official Gaeltacht areas in Northern Ireland, although there have been proposals to establish these in areas where Irish is more widely spoken such as the Gaeltacht Quarter (An Cheathrú Ghaeltachta) established in Belfast.

Attitudes towards the Irish language in Northern Ireland have traditionally reflected the political differences between its two divided communities, with non-Catholics having more negative attitudes towards the language. Recent figures by DCALNI (2014) reveal that a higher proportion of Catholics (30%) have knowledge of Irish than both those with other or no religion (12%) and Protestants (3%) which is not surprising, given that it is mostly the Catholic schools that offer Irish alongside other modern languages. Almost a half (49%) of adults agree that Irish is an important part of Northern Irish culture, although this view is mostly held by Catholics (73%) rather than Protestants (31%) and those with other or no religion (47%).

## Methodology

This paper is based on the analysis of the 2013 Irish Language Survey Data carried out in the Republic and Northern Ireland. The survey involved a probability sample of households using face-to-face interviews in respondents' own homes. The survey was conducted amongst adults aged 18 and over. One respondent per household was selected using the 'next-birthday rule'. Surveys were completed with 1,045 respondents (63% response rate) in Northern Ireland.

The surveys were conducted by trained interviewers who were briefed to ensure the nature of the survey was not revealed prior to the survey ensuring respondents ability or perception of the Irish language could not impact participation. The questionnaire was available in both English and Irish allowing respondents a choice in how to complete the survey. A pre-survey pilot was conducted to test the survey design and methodology. The survey focussed on issues such as exposure to Irish when growing up; parental preferences regarding Irish at school; own attitudes towards Irish at school; teaching and learning Irish in schools; language proficiency and other related topics. This paper draws on data collected from respondents in Northern Ireland.

Attitudes towards the Irish language in Northern Ireland have traditionally reflected political differences between the Protestant and Catholic communities. Figure 2 below shows the break-down of main religious groups in Northern Ireland based on Census 2011 figures and data from 2013 Language Survey (both including adults 18 years and more only)<sup>3</sup>. It shows that according to Census 43 per cent of the population are Protestants, with 39 per cent having Catholic background and a

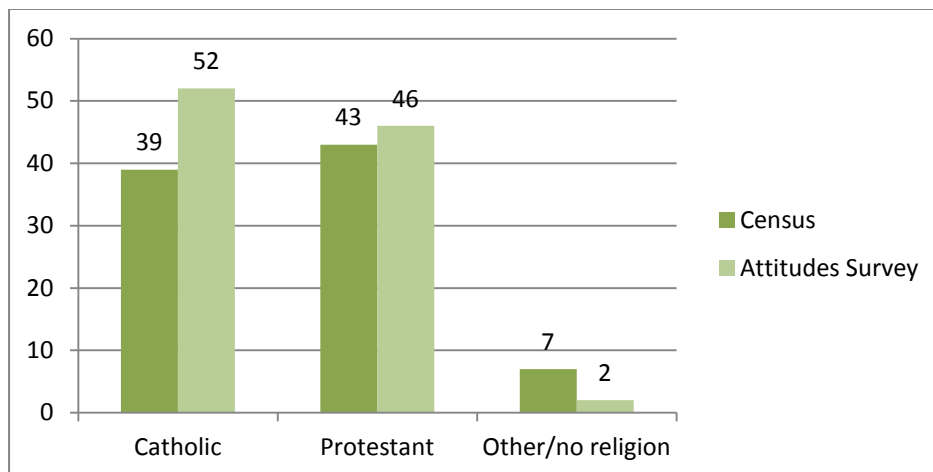
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<sup>2</sup> 2014 pupil figures obtained from NISRA website: <http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> The data is based on answers to the questions: 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?' (2013 Language Survey); and 'What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?' (2011 Census NI).

further 17 per cent belonging to minority religions or none. Analysis of the 2013 Language Survey revealed that out of the sample of 1045, just over half – 52 per cent were Catholic, 46 per cent were Protestant (mostly Presbyterian: 21% or Church of Ireland 12%) or other Christian, and a small proportion (2%) belonged to minority or no organised religion. As the analysis presented in the paper is carried out with unweighted data<sup>4</sup>, it must be kept in mind that the proportion of Catholics is higher in the 2013 Language Survey (age 18+) than in the population.

Figure 2: Census 2011, NI and Language Survey 2013, NI (Religion of population 18+)



Source: 2011 NI Census data and Attitudes Survey 2013 data

Census data on full population (1,810,863) shows that 45 per cent identified them as Catholic or having been raised as one; 48 per cent belong to various Protestant faiths and further seven per cent belong to another religion or none.

## Analytic Approach and Research Results

### Knowledge of the Irish language

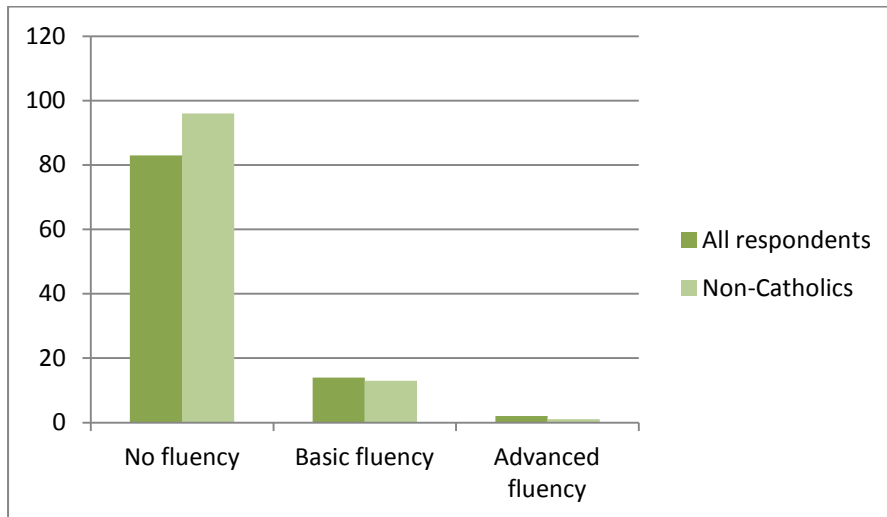
Irish is spoken by a minority of the population. Recent census figures (2011) in Northern Ireland show that 11 per cent of the population reported being able to speak Irish<sup>5</sup>. The 2014 figures of DCALNI show that in 2013/14, 15 per cent of the population had some knowledge of Irish, i.e. could understand, speak, read or write Irish. This is an increase on the 13 per cent of the population who had some knowledge of Irish in 2011/12. A higher proportion of Catholics (30%) had knowledge of Irish than both those with other or no religion (12%) and Protestants (3%). Age seemed to be a factor, with people over 45 years of age being less likely to have knowledge of Irish than 16-44 year olds (13% and 17% respectively). The level of fluency seemed to be low: most people reporting having some knowledge of Irish can only understand some words or simple phrases (DCALNI, 2014). A report by Darmody and Daly (2015) provides more nuanced information on the extent to which the Irish

<sup>4</sup> Population data on 18+ was not available for weighting purposes at the time of writing.

<sup>5</sup> According to 2011 Census data shows that 8% of the population have 'some ability in Ulster-Scots'. The Census includes all respondents at the age of 3 and over. The figures are based on responses to the question: 'Can you understand, speak, read or write Irish or Ulster-Scots?'

language is spoken among the adult population in Northern Ireland drawing on 2001 and 2013 language surveys. The figures show slight increase in the number of people who claimed to have some Irish ability over time. The analysis of 2013 Language Survey indicates that the majority of all respondents in Northern Ireland (96%) reported having ‘no fluency’ in the language (see Figure 3). In other words, they had no Irish or the ‘odd word’ or considered the question ‘not applicable’ to them. Thirteen per cent of Non-Catholics reported having basic fluency (few simple sentences; parts of conversations) and only one per cent considered themselves having advanced fluency (most conversations; native speaker ability).

**Figure 3: Fluency levels of adult population in Northern Ireland**

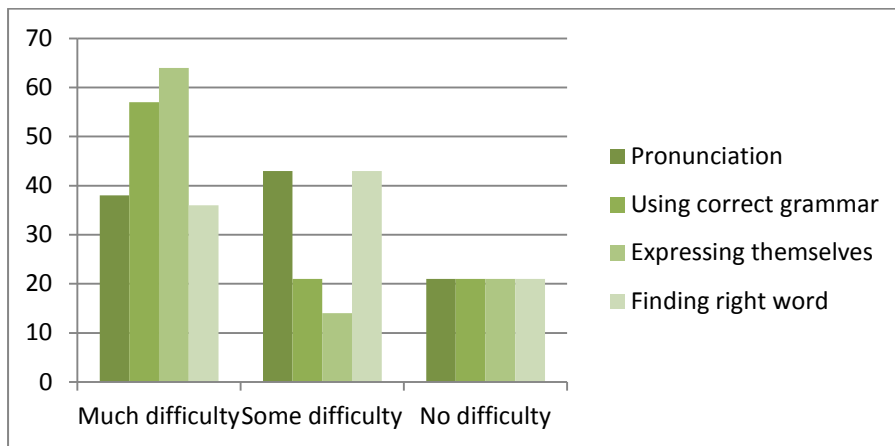


Source: 2013 Language Survey; Non-Catholics n=383

To understand what areas of language use cause the greatest difficulties, the respondents were asked about pronunciation, using correct grammar, expressing what they mean, and finding the right word for special topics. The responses from non-Catholics show that expressing themselves and using the right grammar seemed to cause the greatest difficulties (see Figure 4). Difficulties are also evident in ability to read Irish (see Figure 5), with the respondents most likely to recognise a few words only. It needs to be borne in mind, however, that the numbers of non-Catholic respondents with some knowledge of Irish are small.

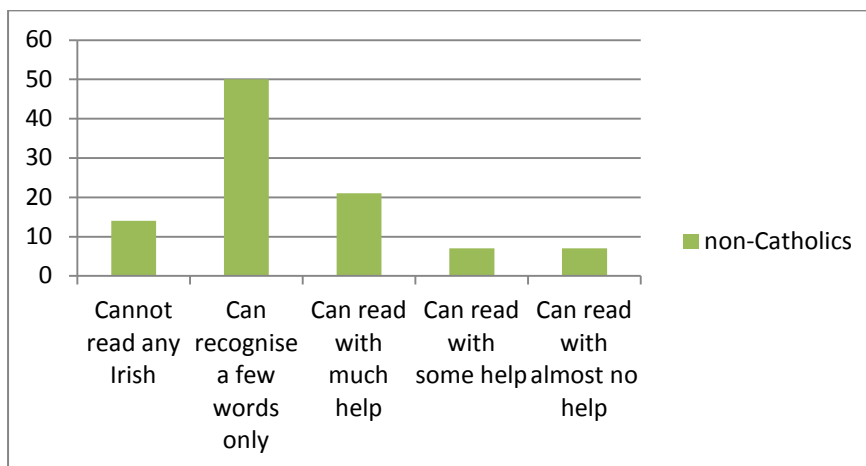


**Figure 4: Difficulties associated with different areas of language use among non-Catholics**



Source: 2013 Language Survey; Non-Catholics n=383

**Figure 5: Ability to read Irish: non-Catholics**



Source: 2013 Language Survey; Non-Catholics n=383

The findings regarding low fluency are not surprising considering the fact that of the non-Catholics (the majority of whom had grown up in NI), 93 per cent had not learned Irish at primary school and 90 per cent had not studied the language in secondary schools. A significant proportion (65%) noted that their parents had not been interested in them learning Irish at school (29% of parents did not care). Seventy seven per cent of non-Catholics had themselves not wanted to study Irish at school, with 18 per cent reporting being indifferent to having it as a subject. Only five per cent of non-Catholics reported that they had wanted to learn Irish at school. Of these, a small number of respondents wanted to do this in order to pass exams, with others wanting to learn it for its own sake (again, numbers here are small; n=16).

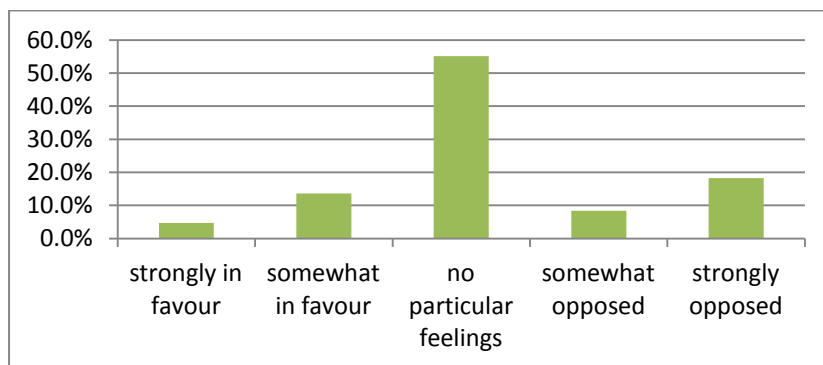
#### Attitudes towards the Irish language

Considering limited exposure of the non-Catholic population in the education system and wider communities, it is interesting to examine their attitudes towards the Irish language. DCAL (2012) survey results showed that of all the respondents in Northern Ireland 35 per cent said they were in favour of the language, 29 per cent said they were against and 35 per cent said they were neither in

favour nor against. In terms of the age of the respondents 46 per cent of those aged 16-24 years and 34 per cent of those aged 25 years and over were neither in favour nor against the Irish language (DCAL, 2012). Language attitudes were strongly associated with the religions background of the respondents: a considerably higher proportion of Catholics than Protestants were in favour of Irish language usage (66% and 14% respectively). However, two-fifths of Protestants (40%) and around a quarter of Catholics (27%) were neither in favour nor against the usage of the Irish language in Northern Ireland (ibid.).

When asked about their attitude towards the Irish language in the 2013 Language Survey, the largest proportion of non-Catholics of 18 years and over (55%) reported having no particular feelings. Eighteen per cent were in favour of the Irish language, with 27 per cent having negative dispositions (see Figure 6). The majority had not tried to learn (or improve) Irish as an adult (only 2 per cent had done this either once or several times). The non-Catholics were also more likely to learn languages other than Irish as adults compared to Catholics.

**Figure 6: Attitude towards the Irish language (non-Catholics)**



Source: 2013 Language Survey; Non-Catholics n=383

Considering all respondents in NI, those with tertiary qualification (proxy for social class) report more positive attitudes toward the Irish language. Just over half of the non-Catholics who have positive disposition towards the language have third level qualification.

### Language and identity

For the first time the 2011 Census in Northern Ireland asked about national identities of the respondents. The figures revealed a complex picture: 40 per cent identified themselves as British only; 25 per cent as Irish only; 21 per cent as Northern Irish only; six per cent as British and Northern Irish only; one per cent as Irish and Northern Irish only and further one per cent as British, Irish and Northern Irish. These findings indicate that national identities in Northern Ireland cannot necessarily be seen as directly related to religion. Furthermore, religious identities interact with the language attitude in complex ways. The 2014 figures based on findings from the Continuous Household Survey 2013-2014 by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in Northern Ireland (DCALNI)<sup>6</sup> showed that

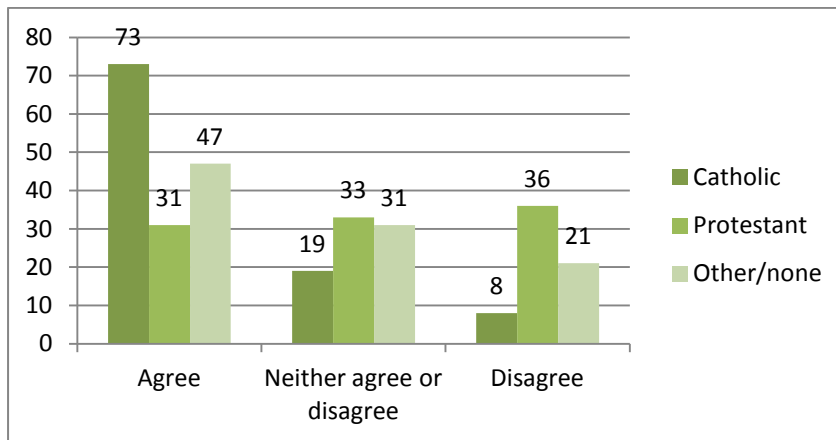
<sup>6</sup> The Continuous Household Survey (CHS) is a Northern Ireland wide household survey administered by Central Survey Unit, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. The 2013/14 survey was based on a random sample of 4,500 domestic addresses drawn from the Land and Property Services

*almost a half (49%) of adults agreed that Irish was an important part of Northern Irish cultural identity. Although a higher proportion of Catholics (73%) agreed that Irish is an important part of Northern Irish culture a sizable number of both Protestants (31%) and those with other or no religion (47%) also saw Irish holding an important part in Northern Irish culture (see Figure 7).*

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*list of addresses and interviews were sought with all adults aged 16 and over in these households. In total 3,751 respondents who answered the Irish module of the survey.*

Figure 7: Irish is an important part of Northern Irish culture (DCALNI 2014)

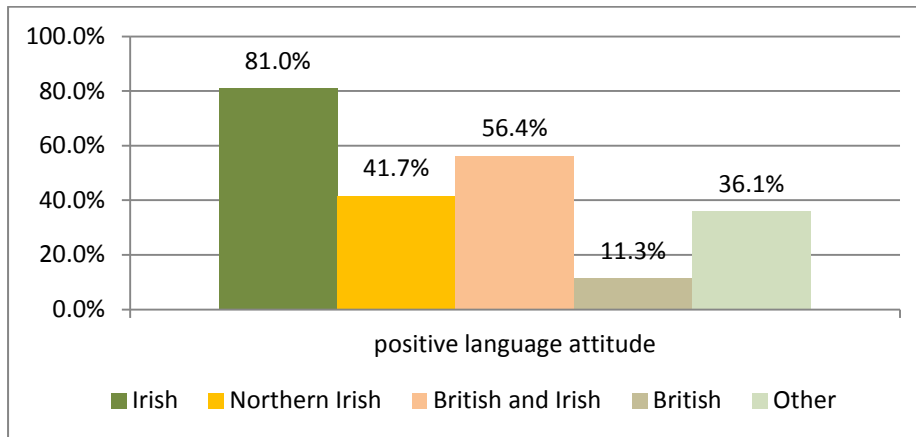


Source: DCALNI 2014 (n=3,751)

As language is considered part of individuals' multiple identities, all respondents in the 2013 Language Survey sample (n=1,045) were asked what best characterises their background. The analysis shows that 32 per cent of the participants in Northern Ireland identified themselves as 'Irish', with 27 per cent seeing themselves as Northern Irish, 31 per cent 'British', 5 per cent 'sometimes Irish and sometimes British' and 4 per cent 'other' (this category mostly included immigrants). In line with the Census figures, the results reveal complex picture of how national identities interact with religious identities in Northern Ireland.

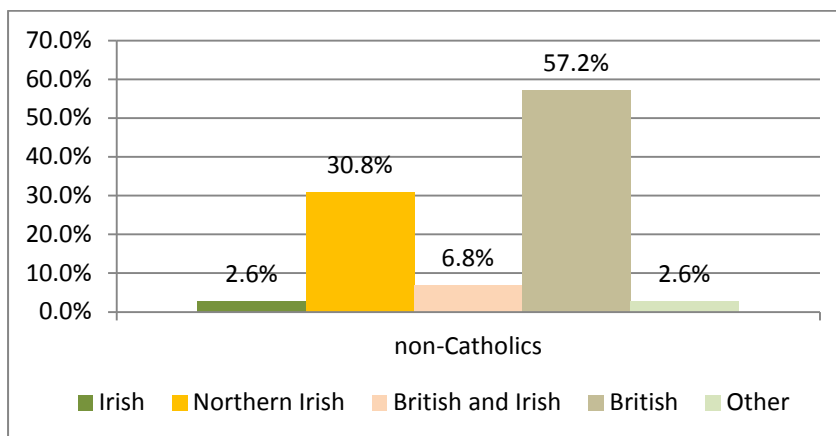
This study considered how attitude towards the Irish language differed between groups of respondents. The 2013 Language survey showed that in NI 45 per cent of the adult population aged 18 and over held positive dispositions towards the language. Analysis of language attitudes by national identity showed that those who saw themselves as 'Irish' or 'Irish-British' held more positive attitudes towards the Irish language (81% and 56% respectively), compared to those who only saw themselves as 'British' (11%) or 'Other' (36%) (see Figure 8). As shown in Figure 9, 'being British' or 'being Northern Irish' was closely associated with non-Catholic background.

Figure 8: Language attitude by identity (all respondents)



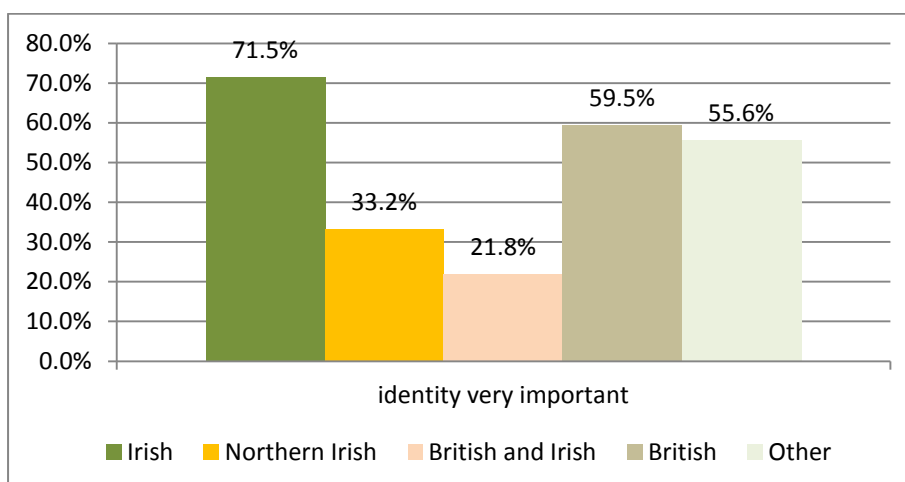
Source: 2013 Language Survey; all respondents n=1,045

Figure 9: National Identity of non-Catholics in Northern Ireland



Source: 2013 Language Survey; Non-Catholics n=383

Figure 10: Belief that Identity is very important by National Identity (all respondents)



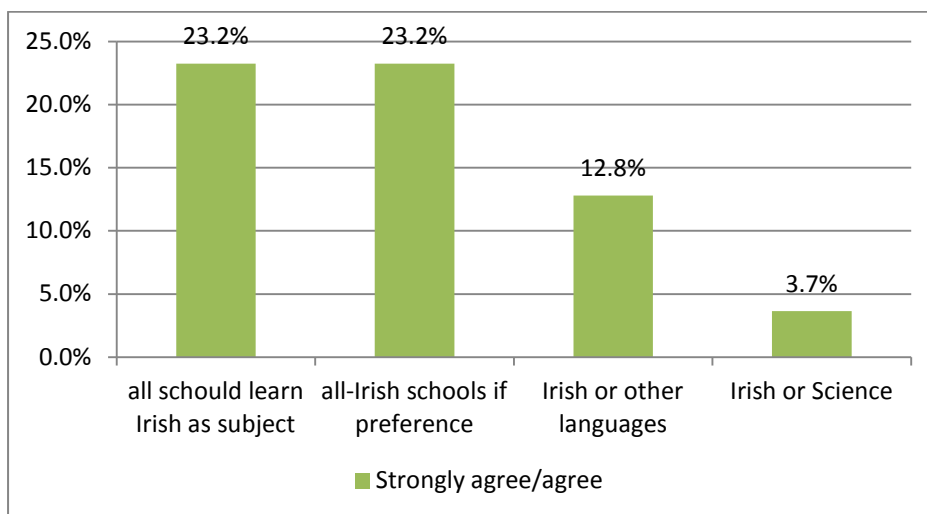
Source: 2013 Language Survey; all respondents n=1,045

Figure 10 shows the extent to which all respondents considered their identity as ‘very important’. Seventy two per cent reported that ‘being Irish’ is very important to them. National identity was ‘very important’ for 54 per cent of non-Catholics).

#### *Irish language in the education system of Northern Ireland*

The next step in the analysis was to explore the extent to which non-Catholic respondents agreed with statements about learning Irish at school as a subject, availability of all-Irish schools, importance of learning the Irish language, compared to learning foreign languages and Science. Figure 11 below shows that an equal proportion of respondents agreed with statements that ‘all children in Northern Ireland should learn Irish as a subject’ and ‘the government should provide all-Irish schools wherever the public want them’ (23%). A relatively small number (13%) felt that ‘it is more important that a child at school learning Irish than a foreign language’, with only 4 per cent agreeing that it is more important for the child to learn Irish than Science at school.

Figure 11: Importance of the Irish language in education system (non-Catholics)



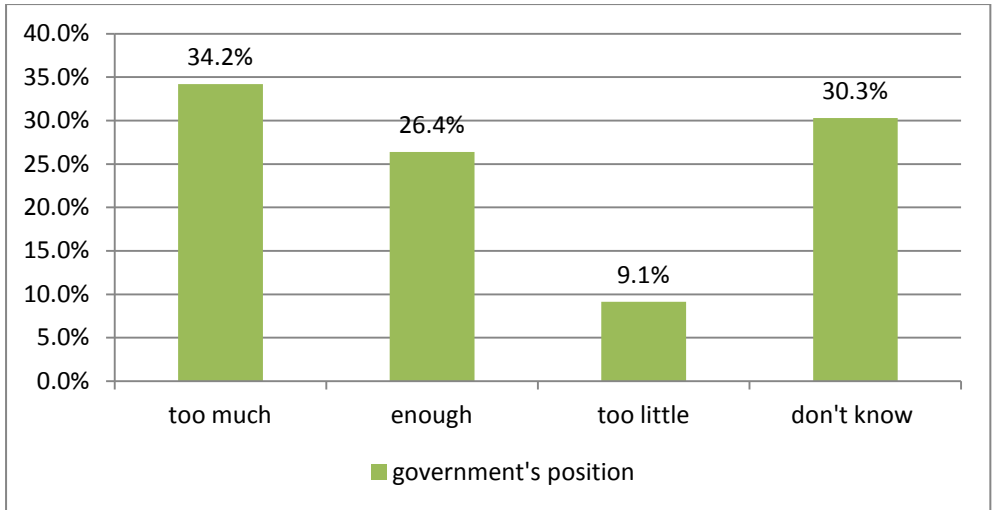
Source: 2013 Language Survey; Non-Catholics n=383

With regard to the wider community, only 13 per cent of non-Catholics had friends or relatives who were bringing up their children through Irish at home or who used a lot of Irish with their children. An equally small proportion (14%), had friends or relatives who spoke any Irish at all outside their home.

#### *The present government’s position on the Irish language*

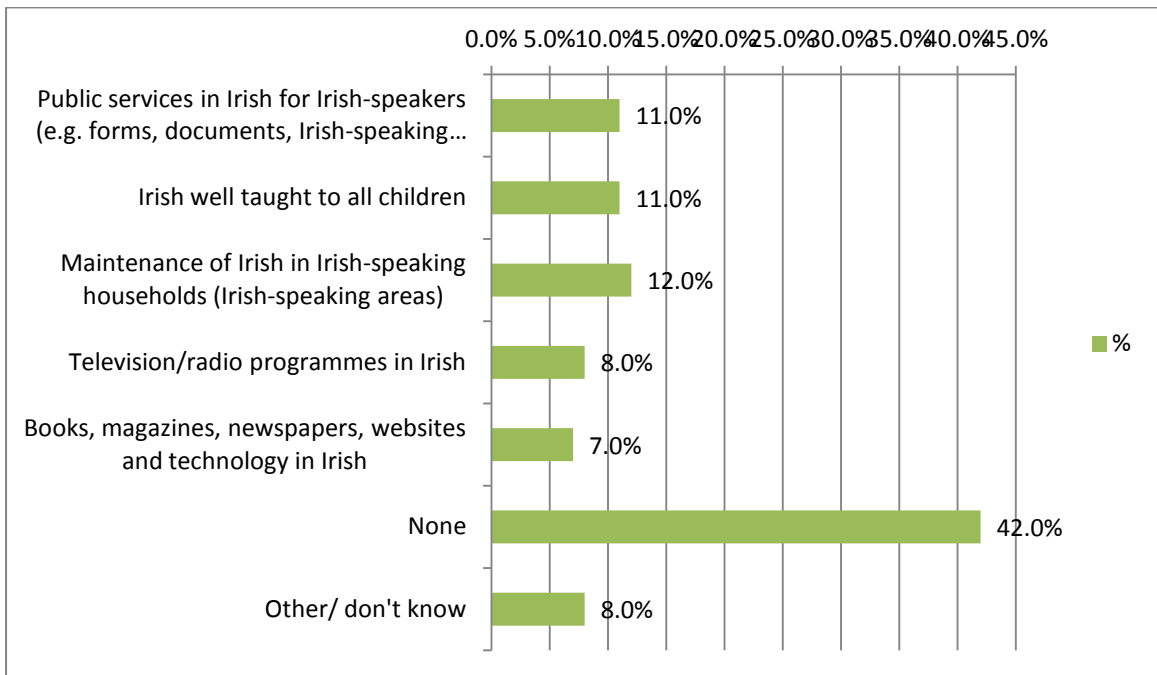
The respondents were asked to describe the present government’s position on the Irish language. The analysis showed that 34 per cent of non-Catholics felt that the government does too much, 26 per cent reported that government does enough, with another 9 per cent feeling that too little is being done by the government to promote the language (see Figure 12). Thirty per cent noted that they ‘don’t know’.

Figure 12: Government’s position (non-Catholics)



Source: 2013 Language Survey; Non-Catholics n=383

Figure 13: Areas that require greatest attention (non-Catholics)



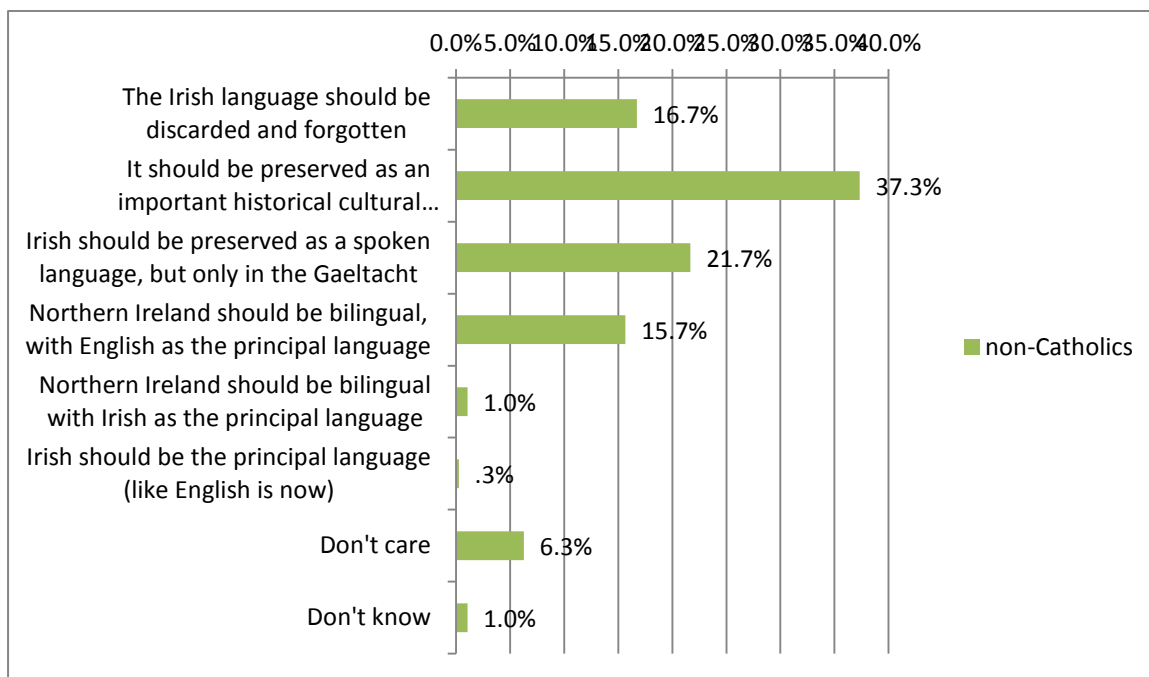
Source: 2013 Language Survey; Non-Catholics n=383

Figure 13 indicates areas where the non-Catholics see room for improvement in promoting the Irish language. The majority of non-Catholic respondents - 42 per cent - noted that there are no areas that need additional attention from the Northern Ireland Executive. Twelve per cent of non-Catholics expect more action in the maintenance of the Irish language in Irish-speaking areas; with 11 per cent highlighting areas such as public services in Irish for Irish speakers and teaching Irish well at school as areas that need attention. Of the nine per cent of non-Catholics who felt that the government 'does too little', most indicated that more attention should be paid to teaching Irish well at school. Of all the non-Catholic respondents in NI 47 per cent disagreed with statement 'the NI Executive should not promote Irish at all' with 42 per cent agreeing and 11 per cent having no opinion.

### Future of the Irish language

Figure 14 presents the perceptions of population in NI regarding the future of the Irish language. The respondents were asked to indicate which of the options offered they would like to see happen. Thirty seven per cent of non-Catholics favoured preservation of the language as an important historical and cultural heritage in literature and music, with 22 per cent wishing it to be preserved as a spoken language but only in an Irish-speaking area (there are no official Gaeltacht areas in Northern Ireland, although there is a concentration of Irish speakers in some areas).

Figure 14: Future of the Irish language (non-Catholics)



Source: 2013 Language Survey; Non-Catholics n=383

### What predicts positive attitudes towards the Irish language among non-Catholics in Northern Ireland?

As a next step, this paper explores what factors are most likely to predict positive attitude among the non-Catholic adults in Northern Ireland towards the Irish language. Table 1 presents a multivariate analysis (logistic regression) of factors predicting positive attitudes towards the Irish language in Northern Ireland. The dependent or outcome variable was constructed by merging 'strongly in favour' and 'somewhat' in favour with 'non-Catholic'. The table presents two models: as a first step, demographic variables are presented, followed by the introduction of family and social circle variables. This approach enables to check whether the latter are more dominant in mediating positive attitudes. A positive coefficient means that the specific factor is associated with positive attitudes towards Irish while a negative coefficient means that having a particular characteristic reduces the likelihood of having a positive disposition towards Irish. The analysis shows that having tertiary education is positively and significantly associated with positive language attitude. Being 25-44 years of age is negatively and significantly associated with language attitude (model 1). When



family and social circle variables were added to the model, the analysis shows that higher education was no longer significantly associated with positive language attitude, although these respondents are still three times more likely to be in favour of the language. Age (25-44) is still negatively and significantly associated with the language attitude. Those who know other languages seem to be twice as likely to hold positive languages.

**Table 2** Positive Attitudes towards the Irish Language among non-Catholics in NI (coefficients)

	Model1	Model2
<b>Demographic characteristics</b>		
<b>Female</b>		
Ref: male	.324	.345
<b>Have kids</b>		
Ref: no kids	-.080	-.071
<b>Education</b>		
Secondary education	.883	.457
Tertiary education	1.705***	1.109
Ref: no qualifications		
<b>Age</b>		
Less than 24 years of age	-1.131	-1.294
betw2544	-1.451*	-1.738**
betw4564	-.881	-1.164
betw6574	.123	-.041
Ref: 75 years of age +		
Urban	.309	.143
Ref: rural		
<b>Family and social circle's disposition towards Irish</b>		
Circle uses Irish		.047
Ref: circle does not use Irish		
Irish identity very important		-.519
Ref: Irish identity not important		
Knows some other languages		1.028*
Ref: does not know other languages		
Parent wanted them to learn Irish		-1.906
Constant	-3.277***	-2.899***
<b>Nagelkere R=</b>	.086	.149

Notes: \*signifies < 0.05; \*\*signifies <0.01; \*\*\*signifies <0.001; < signifies < 0.10.

## Conclusion

Over the centuries, the position of the Irish language on the island of Ireland has changed dramatically. The situation in Northern Ireland is particularly complex, reflecting the 'politicising' of the Irish language. The Irish language is often associated with Catholic identity and Republicanism. Following the Good Friday Agreement and other policies adopted to respect different languages, including Irish, there has been a growing formal recognition of the language. In Northern Ireland the

*provision of Irish in schools varies between sectors with the Irish language mostly provided in the 'maintained' Catholic and some integrated schools. Even then, the Irish language can be offered as an option after other modern European languages such as French, German, Italian or Spanish (McKendry, 2007). Limited exposure to the language was evident in this study as very few adult non-Catholic respondents had studied Irish either in primary or secondary school. It can be argued in this paper that greater exposure to the Irish language in the education system could mean that more young people see it as part of their multiple identities that also include national identity and religious identity. In recent years, the Irish-medium sector in Northern Ireland has grown and children in the jurisdiction may enrol in Irish-medium education, including nurseries, primary and secondary schools. However, it is most likely that Catholics rather than non-Catholics opt for Irish-medium education as a notable number of non-Catholics in this study wish to see Ireland as bilingual but with English as the principal language.*

*Opportunities to speak the Irish language outside the education system are relatively limited, possibly resulting in students seeing the Irish language as 'something you do at school', something that many stop using once they leave the education system. It does not come as a surprise as very few respondents in this study reported having somebody in their circle of friends who uses Irish.*

*According to previous international research, the survival of lesser spoken languages can only be ensured if the population in the jurisdiction feel positive about it and if it is linked to intrinsic motivation and identity. In Northern Ireland, national identity, religion and language are closely intertwined and carry strong political undertones (see O Riagain, 2007). Non-Catholics tend to identify themselves as mainly British and hold either neutral or opposing views to the Irish language. However, in the past the Irish language revival was led by a number of people of Protestant descent (Pritchard, 2004) and at present a number of non-Catholics see the Irish language as an important part of Northern Irish culture as seen in this paper. A sizable minority would like the language preserved, although only in Irish-speaking areas. Considering the limited exposure of the non-Catholic population in Northern Ireland and the politicised undercurrents to language planning and policy, it perhaps not surprising that over half of the non-Catholic respondents have 'no particular feelings' regarding the language. A significant minority see it as an 'artefact' – to be preserved as an important historical and cultural heritage in literature and music, but not as a spoken language. At the same time some non-Catholics hold positive dispositions towards the language – especially those with higher education and those who know other languages. Perhaps success in learning languages in general will also improve attitudes towards the Irish language among younger population. Other studies have found correlation between language use and language attitudes. The findings of this study indicate that even though very few non-Catholics report having knowledge of the Irish language, those with higher levels of educational attainment hold more positive dispositions towards the language, possibly indicating respect towards the Irish language speakers. In addition, the development of language policy that supports the position of lesser-used languages, including the Irish language, may raise the prestige of these languages and, as a result, may translate into more positive public attitudes.*

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