IRISH-LANGUAGE SEAN-NÓS SONG AS A RESOURCE IN SOCIOLINGUISTIC RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potential role of Irish-language sean-nós song and its surrounding discourse in current areas of sociolinguistics, such as the idealisation of native speaker linguistic output, parallel conceptualisations of authenticity, and accent perception in relation to language attitudes and ideologies. Whilst much research continues to be carried out uncovering attitudes and speakers' positioning within Irish-language contexts, explicit examination of these phenomena in the context of singing culture remains under-researched. In an extra-linguistic context, such research may provide additional insights or alternate perspectives on these sociolinguistic issues, whilst simultaneously developing approaches to sociolinguistic research that preserve language's interrelation with the culture and cultural artefacts of the communities in which it is employed. Concurrently, research on accent perception in the context of song is limited and given the phonological breadth of Irish itself and its variation within dialects, regional accents, and pronunciation, this paper will also consider the possibility of sean-nós as a resource from which to further study accent recognition and perception beyond a strictly spoken context. By surveying relevant literature and highlighting parallels between these areas, this paper hopes to draw attention to the value of sean-nós and traditional song in multiple research focuses in sociolinguistics. Furthermore, the role of song in heritage and endangered language research has been highlighted as an area in need of further study in recent literature (e.g. Echeverria and Sparling 2024). Since Irish is a focus of revitalisation efforts, this paper also aims in a broader view to contribute to considerations of the potential value of song as a linguistic medium in revitalisation and cultural and linguistic transmission.

Keywords: language ideologies, accent perception, authenticity, sean-nós, language revitalisation

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Introduction

The continued decrease in linguistic diversity and the threat to multilingualism is an area of significant interest and engagement within the scholarly community (Huss 2016). In particular, the need for further study of music aiding language revitalisation efforts has been increasingly recognised, for example, through the interconnectivity of music with identity formation, language documentation, cultural transmission, and language acquisition (Echeverria and Sparling 2024). Responding to these calls, this paper further considers the value of song traditions in minority and endangered languages by delineating how the Irish-language sean-nós tradition could function as a resource with which to examine sociolinguistic issues whilst reflexively assisting in the evaluation of the potential value of sean-nós song in language revitalisation efforts, and by extension, scholarship examining the role of song more broadly in such efforts.

This paper situates itself theoretically within the project of ideological clarification as called for by Joshua Fishman (Fishman 1991), which serves as a means to reveal and unravel ideological currents at play within a particular linguistic context. The paper intends to build on such an approach and apply it to a broader conceptualisation of language use that encompasses orality more broadly – in this case the linguistic (and musical) phenomenon of song. Furthermore, it is hoped that research leading from this paper could further develop a more interdisciplinary theory of authenticity encompassing its simultaneous linguistic and musical manifestations. Closely related to the topic of authenticity is native speakerism; whilst the debates surrounding ideal terminology to refer to language users are far from settled, for the purposes of this paper, the term "new speaker" is used to differentiate an identity as a user of the language, as opposed to a learner. The commonly-used term "native speaker" is recognised as ideologically loaded and is consequently used loosely in this paper to refer to the categorisation. Whilst not ideal, the term "non-native" has been retained according to its use in certain sources, rather than the preferred "new speaker", as has the term "L1/L2 user". From a broader linguistic perspective, this paper is theoretically situated in a view of language that is intertwined (though not strictly aligned) with culture and cultural artefacts. Consequently, this view does not see language revitalization as an exclusively linguistic affair, but one that enriches and is enriched by other cultural artefacts, such as folklore, song, or epistemologies. Potential methodological approaches envisioned for the proposed research could consist of both qualitative and mixed-methods methodologies, such as participant observation or ethnographic interviews.

Lillis Ó Laoire has stated that "Gaelic song is among the foremost cultural resources in the Irish language, one that has frequently been availed of

productively" (Ó Laoire 2008: 2). As will be discussed later in the article, Irish song is already used in educational settings: in language classes, courses, schools, and in broader popularisation efforts. Nevertheless, detailed study of the linguistic value (or lack of value) of song being used in this way in a minority language setting has, to the best of the author's knowledge, not been undertaken. Consequently, this paper considers the clarification of ideological work at play in such settings as being of paramount importance, as "song is a hotbed of thought and identity formation" (Ní Shíocháin 2017: 1). For example, questions such as the extent to which dialect, lexis, or pronunciation are transmitted to learners through song, and the manner in which and the attitudes and beliefs with which this is carried out require clarification. In this regard, sean-nós (the 'old style' of unaccompanied singing), offers an ideal setting for such research, as will later be proposed in the paper.

The first part of this paper will provide an outline of views and principles focused on the continued uncovering of language attitudes and ideologies. In particular, three prominent issues will be discussed: the reproduction and valuation of native-speaker (-like) skills in both majority and minority languages, second, the conceptualisation of linguistic 'authenticity' (Wilce and Fenigsen 2015), and third, listeners' perception(s) of accents. This paper will begin with a brief overview of the fundamental positions in each of these sociolinguistic and sociophonetic issues, consider examples of recognition of their relevance within the context of Irish language, and finally consider how sean-nós could relate to the issues presented to further broaden our understanding of how Irish language-using singers and their performances are perceived and positioned by their listeners in relation to these sociolinguistic concepts and ideologies. It is not the intention of this paper to present a case-study at this stage, rather to consider potential paths forward and present the foundations for such future work. As a consequence of the presentation of Irish-language sean-nós' interrelation, it is hoped that this paper may contribute to the growing body of literature examining the value of musical performance to sociolinguistic research, and by extension, minority and endangered revitalisation efforts more broadly.

Language Revitalisation and Classification Tools

Scholarly work has continued to develop significantly over the last half-century since the groundwork established by Joshua Fishman, with continued calls for greater efforts to resist obsolescence and with greater urgency since the 'catastrophic' predictions of swathes of language extinctions by the end of this century (Krauss 1992: 7). In particular, the classification of language change in the form of GIDS (Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale) has served as the basis for further recognition and organised typological classification of the state

of language shift around the world. Fishman's GIDS, published in 1991, positioned languages in an eight-level scale, ranging from use in higher state institutions across the country to usage only by the grandparent generation (Fishman 1991). The model focuses on diagnosing intergenerational disruption, rather than developing ways to maintain and recover the language. It also recognises the domestic setting as being of fundamental importance in language transmission. However, the higher levels of the model (above level 5) have been critiqued for over-emphasising the role of institutions and under-emphasising the role of the domestic setting (Lewis and Simons 2010: 4-5). Between 2002 and 2003, a UNESCO panel of experts developed the UNESCO framework, which uses six levels and focuses more on intergenerational transmission without the presence of institutions (UNESCO 2003; 2010: 5-6). This six-tier model has also been critiqued, particularly, regarding its truncation of GIDS' higher tiers into one category, namely, "safe" (Lewis and Simons 2010: 6). Another model now commonly employed is EGIDS (Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale), developed by Lewis and Simons (2010), which aligns and integrates the previous models to address the nuance of the higher levels, amongst other limitations. This model has also been critiqued for using insufficiently clear terminology (Bradley and Bradley 2019: 19). As part of Fishman's call for ideological clarification, Suzanne Romaine (2006) has offered a reconsideration of the theoretical basis for Fishman's proposition to reverse language shift, arguing for the need to think beyond intergeneration transmission. She also draws attention to the increasing role of education in building speech communities, noting the situation with Irish (Romaine 2006: 466). Similarly, Ofelia García has positioned Fishman within broader understandings of complex identity creation and its fluidity, as well as in relation to the surrounding power dynamics at play (García 2012: 99).

Whilst these tools play a crucial role in revitalisation efforts, the multifactorial causes of language shift, such as migration, employment opportunities, and the many faces of colonisation, require considerably more acute identification, articulatory precision, and clarification. Issues such as the definition of a 'speaker' and the extent to which new speakers are taken into account have been raised in recent scholarship (e.g. Boltokova 2017), whilst others have brought the role of technology within endangered language contexts to the fore as an aspect insufficiently recognised in current frameworks (e.g. Drude et al. 2018). The conscious or unconscious attitudes and ideologies held by language users is one of the crucial causes for language shift, and it is towards the uncovering and clarification of such beliefs and perspectives that this work intends to contribute. Following the critiques articulated above from Lewis and Simons (2010), a theoretical position supportive of revitalisation focused on the domestic setting (a bottom-up approach) and of the significance of new speakers in the assessment

of languages' health is adopted here. As clarified further below, "new speaker" is understood here as a classification of a speaker "who acquired the language outside of the home" and considers themselves able to use the language proficiently and regularly does so (O'Rourke and Walsh 2015: 64), rather than a sociolinguistic classification focused exclusively on being a language learner. For a more thorough overview of the range and development of endangered language classification and assessment criteria not covered here (in particular, Ethnologue and Krauss inter alia), see Lee and Van Way 2018 and Bradley and Bradley 2019 (Chapter 2).

1. Language Attitudes and Ideologies, Authenticity, and Accent Perception

1.1 Language Attitudes and Ideologies

Drawing from Irvine (1989), Woolard presents language ideologies as "morally and politically loaded representations of the nature, structure, and use of languages in a social world" and positions the conceptualisation of language ideologies, which will be followed in this paper, as being "*about* language itself, rather than all ideologies encoded *in* or *through* language." (Woolard 2020: 1). Similarly, but distinctively, language attitudes can be defined as "evaluative reactions to language" (Dragojevic et al. 2021: 4) and this will be used as the working definition for this paper; however, the complexity of the concept in social psychology and the focus of much research being oriented towards spoken forms is recognised.

One of the most prominent language ideologies that has undergone scrutiny since the latter twentieth century is the idealisation of 'native speakers' of a particular language. Such critiques emerged in response to Chomsky's "ideal speaker-listener" (Chomsky 1965: 3) and a view supported by structuralist and generativist conceptions of language (Bauer 2021: 76) that the native speaker is, in effect, an embodiment of the language. This position contrasts significantly with notions of language viewed as the continually changing linguistic tools of the individual (e.g. Hudson 1996: 30), as well as other post-structuralist positions. Adrian Holliday, drawing from Alan Davies' substantial work on the issue, has considered how the idealisation of native speaker output can be linked to an ideology of 'othering' and heavily problematises this mentality (Holliday 2006: 385-386). Critiques have also approached this issue from alternate angles, for example, by arguing against the binary distinction between native and non-native speaker, suggesting that in the case of L2 communities "in time the L2 … would become the L1 for children born into that community" (Davies 2013: 1). It is well-recognised that an idealised perception of native speaker output has been shown to have a disproportionately discriminatory effect on the employment

opportunities and careers of 'non-native speakers' of a language (Maganaka 2023). Recent scholarship has begun to consider detriments for native speakers themselves, highlighting how over-idealisation can lead to problematic treatment, for example, a failure to recognise professional skills and expertise (Lowe and Kiczkowiak 2016). Consequently, as the breadth of perspectives and lived experiences reported continues to amass, the complexities of the issue's side effects are being increasingly uncovered and recognised (Hornsby 2015).

Approaches to and conceptualisations of the topic vary within the literature, and Davies has observed that Second Language Acquisition focuses on the distinction between 'native speaker' in contrast with the 'proficient non-native speaker', whereas Applied Linguistics focuses on the articulation and gradation of the issues within the conceptual space of a continuum (Davies 2013: 2; e.g. Pinner 2014). As highlighted by Davies' suggestion that new speakers raising a child in the language could imply that the child is a 'native-speaker' and complimentary literature regarding the creation and transmission of creoles, there has been greater consideration of including more nuanced terminology, such as 'heritage speakers' and the more recent 'new speakers.' In this paper and in the context of Irish, the term 'new speakers' is used to refer to "those individuals who acquired the language outside of the home and who report that they use Irish with fluency, regularity and commitment." (O'Rourke and Walsh 2015: 64). As Ó Murchadha et al. 2018 have pointed out, "New speakers have existed as long as speakers of different languages have been in contact with each other" (Ó Murchadha et al. 2018: 1). Scholars such as Alastair Pennycook have tried to bridge the gap between 'native' and 'new' speakers with the term 'resourceful' speakers, based in a perspective that when we use language, we "draw on linguistic repertoires" (Pennycook 2014: 4). Consequently, the applied terminology can better recognise the collection of linguistic tools located in the individual user, according to which any inevitable assessment made occurs on the basis of the extent of the individual's resources, which may in particular cases be greater on the side of a 'new speaker'.

1.2 Authenticity

The second selected area surrounding language attitudes and ideologies concerns how the reproduction of native-speaker (-like) skills in minority languages among both native speakers and new speakers are interconnected with the concept of linguistic 'authenticity' (Wilce and Fenigsen 2015). Kathryn Woolard presents the concept of authenticity as "the genuine expression of a community or of a person's essential 'Self,'" and describes how locality acts as a determinate of value attribution towards linguistic output (Woolard 2016: 22). Lowe and Pinner (2016) have examined the relation between these two concepts, building on

Holliday's (2005) work on the implication of authenticity within debates around native speaker output idealisation. They construct a theoretical framework built on "authority, culturism, and the notion of cultural capital" (Lowe and Pinner 2016: 28) and take their theoretical considerations further by extending them to practical and observable manifestations within the language teaching profession. Observations within Second Language Acquisition have also suggested the impossibility of capturing authenticity (Chen 2023), despite its widespread usage in language teaching contexts (Gilmore 2007). Whilst, like native-speakerism, much work has been carried out focusing on the English language, the range of attitudes in this regard has also been noted as prevalent in minority language environments, due to their rapidly changing nature (Sallabank 2018). In both contexts, the concept of authenticity can lead to native speakers emphasising a sense of belonging over the language and expressing dissatisfaction with linguistic change by focusing on a created view of how the language should be spoken authentically (Sallabank 2018). Consequently, this conceptualisation of an authentic form of the language may become bound to both specific communities and geographical areas (Ardoino 2023). As Woolard has observed, "a speech variety must be very much "from somewhere" in speakers' consciousness, and thus its meaning is constituted as profoundly local." (Woolard 2016: 22). This idea is taken forward by Penelope Eckert, who suggests this locality is not generic but rather "as distinct from some other." (Eckert 2018: 153). This can lead to divisions within minority language environments between so-called traditionalists and users who have acquired the language as a second language and are influencing linguistic communities (O'Rourke et al. 2015). Such critiques of 'purism' and those resisting or rejecting manifestations of language change have highlighted such a view's counterproductivity in language revitalisation by demotivating and putting off new speakers of the language (Dorian 1994). Similarly, if the authenticity of the language being spoken is bound to place and being local, this would inevitably lead to the learner being viewed as inauthentic (Woolard 2016: 24). The concept of authenticity has also been critiqued based on the view that what would have been considered authentic by an older generation, may well have been considered inauthentic by a previous generation (Wong 1999) and consequently, language's continual changing makes its authenticity a highly questionable concept.

Nevertheless, conciliatory approaches have also emerged in the literature, which highlight the need for sensitivity in this issue, particularly in the contexts of minority and endangered languages. For example, the mutual exclusivity of the authentic-anonymous dichotomy has been challenged, with the case being made for an overlap between the two and greater consideration in this regard on the part of activists (Ardoino 2023). Similarly, approaches which extend beyond strictly linguistic perspectives, as this paper intends to do, have brought to light

the inseparability of language and, for example, a culture's epistemology (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 1999). In this way, the view that there is categorically no 'authenticity' has also been criticized as failing to take into account the interconnectedness of authenticity and identity, for example, manifested in the bond between ethnicity and language or belief in a language's divine origin within a culture's own cosmology (Henze and Davis 1999: 10). Consequently, a case could be made that insufficiently nuanced critiques of authenticity may fall wide of the mark and unintentionally dismiss a culture's worldview, and consequently, impose one's own. Resistance to such attitudes have been expressed and led to politically heated situations regarding the management of resources due to distinct visions between activists and locals (Warner 1999), feeding into broader calls for work on ideological clarification in language revitalisation activities (Kroskrity 2009). Such critiques have helped scholars distinguish between purely "linguistic form" and "the expression of traditional values" through language, applying this nuance to incorporating broader cultural experience alongside language learning (Hinton and Ahlers 1999: 57).

1.3 Accent Perception in Song

The third area of interest for this paper is accent perception, specifically in the context of song. Accent perception has grown into a vast field, approached from multiple angles within multiple disciplines of linguistics, including neurolinguistics, psycholinguistics, phonetics and phonology, second language acquisition, folk linguistics, and sociolinguistics. Within sociolinguistics, the literature on song has tended to focus on production and/or perception, drawing from sociophonetics and identity construction. Third-wave sociolinguistics' focus on identity construction has also shone a light on the extent of potential ideological expressions indexed in each linguistic variant within an indexical field (Eckert 2018: 144). In turn, this leads to actors creating meaning at the micro level through variation (Eckert 2018: 163). A notable starting point for research focusing on production is Peter Trudgill's 1983 work on how pronunciation within British pop songs is modified to sound more 'American' (Trudgill 1983). Trudgill analyses a number of performances and tracks the changes of phonetic variables across recordings by selected popular artists over time. His consideration of potential motivations is of particular interest, as it touches on the intended audience perceptions created by the artists' phonetic decisions. In this way, his work incorporates observations touching on both production and perception. Such work on this phenomenon has continued, although once again, the linguistic context continues to be predominantly English. For example, Simpson has examined Americanisms in British pop singers' phonetic and syntactic decisions and constructed a "longitudinal,

diachronic perspective" (Simpson 1999: 344). Joan Beal's work on accent and dialect features in songs by the Arctic Monkeys have also gone further to link the phenomenon to authenticity, noting a conceptualisation grounded in ontology (Beal 2009). Within the context of music, the phonetic and phonological features of the Arctic Monkey's Alex Turner have been analysed to uncover use of prestige varieties and a shift from Northern English features to US-influenced features (Flanagan 2019). Of particular note is Andy Gibson's work, which has also recently examined English popular music; however, Gibson has expanded the genres further to include hip-hop, observing greater accent variation in hip-hop compared to pop (Gibson 2024). Being of particular relevance to this paper, these findings suggest that from a sociophonetic perspective the expansion of genres analysed may in fact help to deepen our understanding of the phenomena, rather than simply confirming previous findings. Gibson has also further expanded the methodological approach to this area by integrating corpora as a data source, allowing for a more quantitative methodology (Gibson 2019: 2024). Whilst these authors have tended to focus on pop music, there is also recognition of the need for further research using "different types of song and speech" (Mageau et al. 2019: 16), and specifically by examining the phenomenon in the context of minority and endangered languages (Hildebrandt et al. 2017). Given the distinctiveness of sean-nós and the phonological richness and variation of the language, this is something which Irish could offer.

In terms of perception and recognition of accents when singing, the literature is much more limited, and whilst the studies mentioned do begin to take this aspect into consideration by discussing singers' intentions, the literature examining perception directly has potential for development. Furthermore, the focus continues to be on English, creating a limited phonological data pool from which the production of a larger-scale linguistic theory could begin. Despite these limitations, studies which have been carried out have already offered promising insights. For example, some studies have shown that listeners are able to recognise whether someone is a native speaker or not more easily when a text is spoken than sung (Mageau et al. 2019). It has also been noted that the phonological differences between a native speaker and non-native speaker are minimised when they are singing, compared to when they are speaking (Mageau et al. 2019). Considerable reduction in intelligibility has been documented when texts are sung, compared to when they are spoken in both classical and popular genres (Collister and Huron 2008), whilst the height of pitch being sung has also been posited as an influence towards decreased intelligibility (Di Carlo and Germain 1985). The effects found on the perception of texts when sung appear to be significant, and consequently the implications for identity construction and reception and on the manifestation of language attitudes and ideologies on the side of the listener deserve scrutiny. Therefore, further examination of this

phenomenon would be a point of particular interest in regard to developing a thorough understanding of the categorisation and location of speakers within a linguistic community.

Similar work on the overlap between musical and linguistic acquisition and reproduction, which could be highly relevant and informative for potential revitalisation efforts, has also begun to be examined within second language acquisition. For example, initial findings suggest that singing can aid language learners in developing their ability to acquire new phonetic and phonological features and observing "an enhanced auditory working memory and vocal flexibility" (Christiner and Reiterer 2013: 10).

2. Language ideologies in the context of Irish language and song

2.1 The Irish language

The Irish language (*Gaeilge*) is a member of the Goidelic language family, alongside Scottish (*Gàidhlig*), and Manx (*Gaelg*) (Ó Siadhail 1989: 1), spoken on the Island of Ireland (both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland) and abroad. According to the Irish Census 2022 Report, 1,873,997 people over the age of three years old described themselves as being able to speak Irish; however, only 71,968 people claim to speak the language on a daily basis outside education (Central Statistics Office 2022). The Irish language is recognised as the first official language of Ireland according to Article 8.1 of the Irish Constitution, with English as the second official language according to Article 8.2 (Bunreacht na hÉireann 1937). Irish has also gained official status within the EU (Council of the European Union [1958] 2013). In Northern Ireland, the Irish language recently gained recognition through the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 (Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022). In the 2021 Census, 6,000 respondents aged 3 and over (0.3%) claimed that Irish was their main language, whilst 12.4% 'had some ability' (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2022: 2-6).

The earliest records of the language are those carved into stones in Ogham script, dating as far back as around the fifth century, with examples of orthodox Ogham having been found across Ireland, as well as in Wales and the Isle of Man (McManus 1991). Over the course of the language's historical changes through Primitive Irish, Old Irish, Middle Irish, and Early Modern Irish to its current varieties, Irish has both been heavily influenced by and had its own influence on its neighbours and their language varieties through historical language contact (Ó Siadhail 1989: 1). Due to the influence of English and social pressures and coercions, Irish underwent serious decline over the nineteenth century (Walsh 2023: 1163-1164), leading to an emerging activity and awareness of the need for

the language's revitalisation at the end of the century (Doyle 2015: Chapter 7). This transpired firstly with the establishment of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, and soon after, the Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge), founded in 1893 by, amongst others, Douglas Hyde (Denvir 1995). Numerous pivotal moments and challenges for the language's revitalisation followed, particularly during the twentieth century following the establishment of the Free State of Ireland in 1922 (Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Dhonnabháin 2015). Whilst the history of Irish is not the focus of the paper, a number of relevant processes and decisions will be indicated.

The task of standardisation throughout the twentieth century is of particular relevance to this paper, since one cause of the task's challenging nature is precisely what renders it an ideal opportunity for sociolinguistic study. As will later be discussed in greater detail, the Irish language has considerable phonetic and phonological variation across the country, not only as divided by provinces (Ulster, Connaught, and Munster), but also within these regions (Ó Siadhail 1989). Historically, this has been observed in discussions on both vowel and consonant articulation being found in the same word (e.g. the question of articulation or inarticulation of the voiceless labiodental fricative /f/ in the future tense suffix -faidh/fidh) (Doyle 2015: 225). Consequently, whilst grammar and spelling were standardised in the Official Standard (An Caighdeán Oifigiúil), first published in its entirety in 1958 and revised editions in 2012 and 2017 (Houses of the Oireachtas 2017: xvii), pronunciation has remained less strictly defined. For example, coursebooks, such as the Gaeilge gan Stró series provide excerpts with a variety of accents (Ó Dónaill 2010; 2011). Similarly, broadcasters such as TG4 and RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta, following an Caighdeán Oifigúil present a broad range of accents and dialectic features (Moriarty 2015: 57). An Caighdeán Oifigúil itself recognises how this variation contributes to "the richness of the language" ("an saibhreas teanga") (Houses of the Oireachtas 2017: xviii). A parallel project of particular interest is the "Lárchanúint", first developed by Dónall Ó Baoill in 1986. The Lárchanúint was a core pronunciation situated between the other Irish dialects and a means of standardising Irish pronunciation. Whilst the idea of the Lárchanúint was well-received by educationalists, accommodations for distinctive regional phonology required further elaboration, as noted by Ó Baoill himself (Ó hIfearnáin and Ó Murchadha 2011: 100). Similarly, Raymond Hickey has drawn attention to aspects of the Lárchanúint, such as phonetic transcription, in need of refinement (Hickey 2011: 104). Nevertheless, looking to consumers of media beyond the Gaeltacht, the potential value of a Lárchanúint has been raised in recent years (Walsh 2018: 17).

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The establishment and delineation of the Gaeltacht[1] began with the formation of a commission in 1925 (Ó Tuathaigh: 1990: 4) and has since been adjusted and reshaped accordingly (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2007: 8). However, the reality of preserving the language within the Gaeltacht has proved more complicated; for example, the willingness of residents of the areas to continue to use Irish and raise their children could not be taken for granted (Doyle 2015: 204). Similarly, the expectation of the Gaeltacht to remain preserved and unchanged, in effect a window into a past 'pure' era has been and remains problematic, as will be discussed in greater detail below (O'Rourke and Brennan 2019). For example, romanticised views did not always sufficiently recognise the existence of poverty in the Gaeltacht and such motivations for change were overlooked or not sufficiently addressed (Doyle 2015: 202-203; Walsh 2022: 102-103, 107, 307-308). Similar issues such as the need for housing for fluent Irish speakers to remain in the Gaeltacht continue to the present, including lobbying in the most recent election (Tuairisc 2024). Similarly, it is only recently that the initiative for the formation of the *Bailte Seirbhíse Gaeltachta* (Gaeltacht Service Towns) and *Líonraí Gaeilge* (Irish Language Network) has recognised the "new spaces of language socialisation outside the Gaeltacht" and the influence of new speakers that have occurred through efforts over the last century (Department of Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht 2020: 8; Walsh 2022: 306-307).

The contemporary situation of the Irish language continues to provide fertile ground for research into the sociolinguistic debates outlined related to native-speakerism and authenticity. For example, O'Rourke and Brennan's work has highlighted how the use of concepts such as authenticity, employed by the state in the construction of the Gaeltacht, has led to expectations of a preserved and pure traditional lifestyle (O'Rourke and Brennan 2019). Similarly, it has been observed that there is often a focus on preserving Irish in the Gaeltacht regions, rather than promoting its revitalisation outside these areas, for example, in cities (McDermott 2011: 28). Such perceptions have been examined by Ó hIfearnáin and Ó Murchadha, whose studies of Gaeltacht speakers, younger Gaeltacht speakers, and non-Gaeltacht Irish speakers have contributed to the uncovering of attitudes towards Irish-language users, noting how Gaeltacht speakers' speech was valued the most highly whilst simultaneously observing a link between non-Gaeltacht speech and covert prestige (Ó hIfearnáin and Ó Murchadha 2011). The problem of acceptance of new speakers has been examined by Hornsby and

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[1]   Gaeltacht regions are defined, at least in principle, by the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act, 1956 2(2) as being "specified areas, being substantially Irish-speaking areas and areas contiguous thereto which, in the opinion of the Government, ought to be included in the Gaeltacht with a view to preserving and extending the use of Irish as a vernacular language." (Government of Ireland 1956).

Ó Murchadha, who argue that 'new speakers' of Irish can be associated with the standardised version of the language and consequently find themselves placed in opposition to 'authentic' or 'native' speakers; consequently, new speakers can find themselves situated in tension with 'traditionalist' or 'purist' attitudes that perceive standardised Irish as a threat to the preservation of 'authentic' language (Hornsby and Ó Murchadha 2021).

Whilst Irish dialects are often divided into three general regions, namely, Ulster, Connaught, and Munster, there is also variation within these regions. Studies continue to examine the prosody of these variations, focusing on a range of prosodic features (e.g. Ní Chasaide 2004), as well as contrast in pitch, with further sub-categorising of the three regions mentioned, for example, Dalton and Ní Chasaide's (2007) comparison of Donegal, Kerry, Mayo, and South Connaught. Studies of both palatisation and velarisation (slender and broad consonants) have also been carried out, focusing specifically on one region (Connemara) and employing ultrasound (Bennett et al. 2018). Given the focus of this research on prosodic differences between dialects, the Irish language could offer a suitable context in which to examine how distinctive features of these dialects are perceived when being performed in song-form; however, the wide range of sonic variables would require careful management for such a study to be of significant value.

Having identified the Irish language as an area of continued interest for sociolinguistic research of native speaker idealisation, conceptualisations and constructions of authenticity, and accent variation between dialects, the next section of this paper will begin by briefly drawing together current research on language ideology and song, leading to a convergence between these sociolinguistic phenomena, the Irish-language, and traditional song in the form of sean-nós singing. In doing so, the paper aims to indicate this convergence as a potential area for further research in order to contribute to a deeper understanding of the sociolinguistic phenomena and better inform the language revitalisation apparatus.

2.2 A Role for Song

The literature on song and language ideology is limited; however, some studies have been carried out but predominantly focus on the English language. Of note, is Mattar's work on English-language Pop music in Singapore. Mattar observes how whether songs are sung by western English-speakers or by Singaporeans is linked to listeners' perception of the song's quality and authenticity due to Singaporean English being perceived as 'inferior' (Mattar 2009: 179). In concordance with Holliday's linking of native-speaker's roots in othering and Orientalism (Holliday 2006), Mattar similarly notes that "[they] have imposed

Orientalist perceptions upon themselves" (Mattar 2009: 192). Máiréad Moriarty's chapter on globalisation and Irish-language hip-hop has also begun to broach this area in Irish. Moriarty explores sociolinguistic and cultural identity positioning and linguistic commentary of Irish through the medium of hip-hop in the context of globalisation (Moriarty 2015: Chapter 6). Consequently, it appears that issues pertaining to language ideologies may be found to manifest in the linguistic context of song.

Within the Irish context, this paper suggests consideration of sean-nós singing as a particularly promising environment which overlaps both Irish-language sociolinguistic contexts and the linguistic ideological instantiations appearing in the style and its surrounding discourse.

Sean-nós, meaning 'the old style', is used to refer to either the old style of singing or of dancing (Costello 2015: 1). Sean-nós songs are often in the Irish language; however, there are those in English or macaronic form (Rossow, in press: 4). This 'old style' has been associated with specific musical features, such as lack of accompaniment, ornamentation, and nasality, amongst others (Costello 2015). The singer is usually unaccompanied and sung without vibrato (repeated and sustained variation of pitch). The singer also has artistic licence over the pulse and can distort it as they choose (Williams 2004). However, a precise definition of what constitutes sean-nós is a notable issue. A working definition offered by Ford presents sean-nós as "unaccompanied solo singing in the Irish language, whereby variation and ornamentation of the melody are features" (Ford 2017: 84). As with dialect, variation between regions is also present. Sean-nós styles are commonly divided into the same three regions as language: Ulster, Connaught, and Munster. However, within these provinces there is further variation and within these variants, an even greater level of granularity can be uncovered. Beginning with Ulster, the Donegal style of sean-nós singing is considered the most distinct of the three areas, with a stronger sense of pulse than the freer-flowing rhythm found further south. In addition, in the north of Ireland, traditional singing is considerably less ornamented than Galway and to the further south of the country (Ó Laoire 2000: 165), as well as the audible influence of Scottish song (Ó Maoldomhnaigh n.d.). Distinctions can also be found between the Connaught and Munster ways of singing. For example, Ó Riada described Munster songs as employing a greater vocal range and longer melodic lines (Ó Riada 1982, as cited in Williams and Ó Laoire 2011: 31). Pádraig Ó Cearbhaill has also written about the stylistic distinctions of Munster sean-nós, such as *an cosc anála* (stopping the breath as a type of rhythmic ornamentation), as well as the more historic extension of the note length – *nótaí fada* (Ó Cearbhaill 2022: 233-234). The most prized of the three regions is Connemara in Connaught (Williams and Ó Laoire 2011: 47). Represented by famous singers such as Seán 'ac Dhonncha, Darach Ó Catháin, and Seosamh Ó

hÉanaí, the Connemara style is famous for its use of extensive ornamentation and melisma (multiple pitches sung for a single syllable), as well as greater rubato (tempo manipulation by the singer) (Williams and Ó Laoire 2011: 54-55; 58-59).

Even within these broader regional groupings, we can speak of more local musical traditions and practices (Williams and Ó Laoire 2011: 58). For example, Ó Laoire's work on Tory Island singing culture discusses notions of correctness at a much more local level, describing how "there is indeed a very clear idea of the "authentic" or *ceart* in terms of song texts in the Tory community." (Ó Laoire 2007: 107). Similarly, collectors of sean-nós have been able to gather at the town level, noticing distinctions between songs from towns in close proximity (e.g. Mac Seáin 2017: 73). Some scholars have also approached with a lens at the level of the family and also the individual (Ó Laoire 2007; Williams and Ó Laoire 2011: 48), In this regard, the individual's own style and relation with song offers a potential parallel to idiolect in linguistic terms. The linking of style with place also overlooks the rich musical traditions of traveller communities, an area which requires further research (Munnelly 1975). Furthermore, sean-nós activities also take place in urban locations beyond these regional outlines, such as Dublin (Sean-Nós Cois Life) and Belfast (Sean-Nós na Fearsaide), amongst others. Such significant feature-distinctions have been linked to situations where preference has been shown to the Connemara style (Henigan 1991, as cited in Ó Laoire 2000: 167). In particular, the Oireachtas na Gaeilge has been suggested as having a role in the rise of one regional style (Connemara) over others (Costello 2015; 2019). Similarly, the historic tension between this regional granularity and the national perspective of sean-nós as Irish or Gaelic, particularly in the Oireachtas na Gaeilge, has been noted by Éamonn Costello, who describes how simultaneously "the Oireachtas sean-nós competitions constitute a space where the various Gaeltacht regions compete in order to identify the Gaeltacht that is the most authentically Irish." and "…that the inter-Gaeltacht nature of the Oireachtas sean-nós competitions reinforces regional heteroglossia as opposed to national homogeny." (Costello 2019a: 182)

Similarly, it has been argued that modern performances of sean-nós may not be entirely faithful to the manner in which they had been historically sung, due to artistic decisions based on commercialisation of the genre (McDonald and Sparling 2010; Blankenhorn 2021). Such commercialisation in so-called 'traditional' music has been linked with maximising a mystical Celtic romanticism to appeal to customers (Porter 1998; McDonald and Sparling, 2010). Whilst this may indeed be the case, we find that prominent canonical artists such as Joe Heaney did not keep strictly to the performance practices passed down (as cited in Coleman 1997: 39), and consequently, there is a risk of imposing a claim of authenticity on past performances, which may themselves not be (near-)identically replicated. For example, George Petrie was already discussing

the legitimacy of variation in musical practices over a century ago, signalling artistic license at this time; however, he does also explicitly attest to the accurate transmission of airs by singers in particular (Petrie 1902: x-xii). In either case, the extent of variation is highly unlikely to have been as considerable as current trends indicated in the literature. Interestingly, some artists such as Joe Heaney tended to avoid the term entirely (Coleman 1997: 39). Nevertheless, whilst recognising the ambiguity of the classification, due to its current widespread usage in the Irish context and beyond (e.g. Scottish sean-nós) and the issue not being the focus of this paper, the term will continue to be used here.

The question of 'tradition' and 'transmission' are intertwined with the context of sean-nós and 'traditional' song more broadly. Virginia Blankenhorn's recent assessment of the issue questions how the terms 'traditional' and 'authentic' are used in the global marketplace and observes their persisting relevance as concepts to the broader notion of the "Irish song tradition" (Blankenhorn 2021: 15). However, the idea of tradition alone may be too limiting for sean-nós. Ó Laoire draws our attention to the rich concept of *dúchas* and how it extends beyond the narrow scope of 'tradition' (Ó Laoire 2007: 7). The idea of dúchas also compliments the ethos of this research – as cultural interrelation beyond strict categorisations of language and musical technique. Ó Laoire notes the problematisation of the term 'tradition' and draws on the work of Gadamer in presenting tradition as "Old and new … constantly combined together in a choice that is made freely" in contrast with it being "an inert, undeveloping mass" (Ó Laoire 2007: 8). Blankenhorn and Ó Laoire also place complementary historical emphases on the concept, with Blankenhorn locating its rejection in the Enlightenment and Ó Laoire noting its subsequent reaccomodation in Romanticism (Blankenhorn 2021; Ó Laoire 2007: 8).

Notions of tradition also imply means of transmission – an area which continues to develop from the local and domestic through new technologies and alternative means of access. Some scholars have described their journey into sean-nós singing through colleges and summer courses and in time transmitting songs themselves (e.g., Mac Corraidh 2022). The role of such courses, both in song and language, the role of technology in drawing new speakers (Moriarty 2015: 111), and the role new speakers play in transmission highlight the overlap between transmission means between language and music. Sean Williams describes how the transmission of Irish song from Joe Heaney helped "[cement] what understanding of Gaelic [she] had", which suggests that even at a higher linguistic competence level, transmission of song simultaneously aided transmission of language (Williams 2019: 359). Blankenhorn describes her own journey with sean-nós and how through listening to records "chuir [sí] tús le foghlaim na Gaeilge agus na n-amhrán ag an am céanna." ("[she] began learning Irish and songs at the same time" [translation mine, JF]) (Blankenhorn 2022:

215), once again demonstrating the simultaneous transmission of Irish language and sean-nós, as well as this process's development through contemporary technology (Blankenhorn 2021: 13). In fact, this parallel would be fascinating for further research in its own right.

Sean-nós singing has also been linked to the concept of authenticity (Ó Laoire 1998; Ó Laoire 2008: 5; Costello 2019a; 2019b), already suggesting a potential uncovering of parallel attitudes towards authentic linguistic production. Further investigation could examine how performances of the language in the context of song may be perceived and evaluated within linguistic communities, including how it may alter a new speaker's (or "new singer's") placement within the native-new-speaker continuum referred to above. Similarly, such research could examine the singers' own perception of their locus within a linguistic community, and how the added layer of music alters a linguistic act of identity and for what purposes. Consequently, engagement with sean-nós from a sociolinguistic approach could clarify and better establish the apparent observation that language ideologies are not limited only to spoken form, but also to sung form. Consequently, this would enrich and complement current data and may offer the possibility of revealing new and unexpected perceptions and attitudes that can help researchers better navigate the nuanced landscape of minority language communities.

From a sociophonetic and acoustic perspective, pitch contours may be considerably affected by the given pitch variations of the music; however, the extent to which variance in consonant production is affected is not necessarily so clear, and it may be that consonant distinctions in palatisation and velarisation, not to mention outright crossing of phoneme boundaries in the lexis between regions, could be recognised and categorised geographically by listeners. Finally, freedom of pulse employed by the performer may also have an effect on the listeners' perception, since the language is stress-timed according to the traditional dichotomous view (Dorn et al. 2012: 510). Consequently, given the extent of phonetic and phonological data being presented by contemporary research into Irish and given the performance practice and stylistic ornamentation of sean-nós singing, the interplay between the two may offer a valuable context in which to further examine perception from a sociophonetics perspective. Furthermore, such data could add important context to examining the causality of phenomena within the research on language ideology discussed earlier.

In approaching sean-nós from a linguistic perspective, there are also ethical questions to consider. For example, how would such an approach benefit from this tradition without becoming an enterprise exploiting a cultural artefact? It is from this consideration that the paper aims for mutual benefit, specifically, that in using sean-nós song as a means to further understand linguistic attitudes, such research could be reciprocal in clarifying linguistic attitudes surrounding the

Irish language and within linguistic communities that have caused tensions, as has been indicated above. Similarly, it is hoped that sociophonetic data obtained may help to better inform the valuation of sean-nós in Irish language acquisition and revitalisation efforts. However, it is also hoped that the efforts of such research could be applied more broadly to other language's revitalisation efforts, following Fishman's call for interlanguage cooperation in revitalisation theory formulation (Fishman 2001: xiii, as cited in Lewis and Simons 2010). A second example of ethical considerations at a theoretical level is the analytical framework and terminology that is used in handling sean-nós. Interviews carried out with the singer Joseph Heaney serve as an example of how classical musicological terminology (for example, rubato or ornamentation) can be foreign to sean-nós culture and haphazardly be imposed on singers and the style (Coleman 1997: 34). However, it appears that traditional Irish singing is limited in terms of a formal, self-developed, theoretical framework to provide the conceptional tools to aid analysis. For further discussion on a theorisation of sean-nós, see Coleman (1997). Ford (2017: 89) raises a distinct but related issue when discussing musicological analysis of musical identity in the context of Irish sean-nós and Irish musical culture more broadly. In this regard, the literature has uncovered distinctive conceptualisations of song, not merely as music as text, but as inseparably intertwined, with the text serving as the fundament (Ó Madagáin 1985). Similarly, the relation between the syntactic tools employed from a linguistic perspective and the expression of the song have been shown to be intimately connected (Williams 2004). Another area highlighted in the literature concerns the relation between music and identity broadly, and specifically in the context of Irish music and identity. White (1984) has already highlighted the need for a much more nuanced and rigorous approach to Irish music which takes into account the broader social context in which the music is situated. Similarly, building on Bauman's (1992) concept of traditionalization, that is, the imposition of a canon of tradition and a process of legitimisation usually by outsiders, Coleman posits a link between this process and creating "a symbol of national or regional identity" (Coleman 1997: 50). Consequently, such an approach to handling sean-nós requires considerable sensitivity to the language and conceptualisations of and surrounding the culture.

Conclusion

This paper opened by considering the role sean-nós could play in sociolinguistic research, whilst simultaneously considering greater clarification of song's potential value in the project of ideological clarification, an essential prerequisite in language revitalisation efforts (Fishman 1991; Kroskrity 2009). This paper has highlighted current issues in language ideology scholarship, in particular,

on attitudes concerning native-speaker idealisation and the related topic of authenticity conceptualisation. Consequently, it has been indicated that these topics are prevalent in research specific to the Irish language. Linguistic performance within the context of song has also been identified as an area in which these language ideologies emerge; however, thorough examination of this perspective is still lacking. Consequently, this paper suggests that the identified language ideologies could be further studied in the context of Irish-language sean-nós singing.

This paper has also highlighted calls by scholars working within sociophonetics for further research into accent perception, in contrast with production, and for an expansion of languages being taken into consideration in order to diversify and expand the data pool (Hildebrandt et al. 2017; Drager and Kettig 2021). Furthermore, this paper has indicated the emergence of scholarship addressing the production of language within the context of music. In addition, the variability of pronunciation and prosodic features amongst Irish dialects appears to make Irish language particularly suitable for further research into accent perception, and the value and potential role of sean-nós in the context of research on perception of accent in song, due to its stylistic features, could be further examined; in particular, how its stylistic features affect the production of speech and the consequences of overlaps with regional stylistic distinctions. Consequently, it is hoped that sean-nós may be recognised as having significant potential as a sociolinguistic resource, and, pending further study, a resource for revitalisation.

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