REVIEW

O'Rourke, Bernadette and John Walsh. 2020. *New Speakers of Irish in the Global Context: New Revival?* New York: Routledge. 212 pages. ISBN: 978-1032173634.

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The role of the new speaker has become a pertinent field of inquiry in the context of the revitalisation of minoritized languages. In this timely book, Bernadette (henceforth 'Bernie')[1] O'Rourke and John Walsh present an active account of the attitudes and ideologies held by new speakers of Irish in Ireland. They set out to rectify a gap in the research, identified by Williams (2019), wherein researchers would speak on behalf of new speakers, instead of allowing the research participants to have an active voice in the construction of their own narratives. The data presented in the book stems from the work done through EU COST Action IS306 ('New Speakers in a Multilingual Europe: Opportunities and Challenges'), and the fieldwork the authors had done as part of their role within the working group. As such, the authors draw examples from 100 interviews they conducted with new speakers of Irish of all levels and personal backgrounds. Bernie and John are well placed to present this account, as they are both new speakers of Irish themselves, as well as being instrumental in the creation of the new speaker paradigm. Overall, this book provides a cohesive discussion of the development of new speakers in Ireland and a clear analysis of the narratives provided by the research participants in regards to their own personal positionings with regard to the language. Further, this book appears at an opportune time, as the debates regarding who should be the main focus of (especially Goidelic) language revitalisation has begun to receive international media attention. Crucially, then, the authors have presented their argument in clear language, avoiding unnecessarily opaque verbiage, meaning this book can be accessible and useful for researchers who are just now coming to the new speaker paradigm, as well as for more experienced researchers in the field.

This book is organised into six chapters. Chapter 1 presents key themes within the sociolinguistic and historical position of Irish in Ireland, arguing for a re-consideration of the overall approach to include new speakers more fully in the

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[1] Throughout the book, the authors refer to themselves by their first names, and I will follow their lead when referring to one of them directly.

conversation. This chapter also contains the methodological explanation. Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical concepts behind the new speaker paradigm, drawing from the aforementioned EU COST Action working group. Additionally, the authors demonstrate how the concept has developed in the subsequent years and present some critiques of the new speaker framework. Chapter 3 discusses the context of the Irish language in Ireland. This is very elegantly done through a lens of how new speakers exist within the broader history of Irish language decline and maintenance. Chapter 4 begins the analysis, introducing the profiles of ten new speakers, in order to contextualise how and why people become new speakers of a minoritized language in the first place. Chapter 5 focuses exclusively on John's fieldwork among more proficient new speakers, specifically examining the respondents' identities in relation to Irish. Chapter 6, then, is led by Bernie's fieldwork from a *ciorcal comhrá* (conversation circle) in a village outside of the Gaeltacht she calls Cluain Lí, specifically in terms of the participants' views of language ownership. Finally, Chapter 7 draws together the conclusions stated in the previous chapters in order to make recommendations for future policy, and to more fully discuss the relationship between new speakers and the Gaeltacht, which is currently a tension within the scope of Irish language revitalisation.

The first chapter, as stated, examines the sociolinguistic situation in which new speakers of Irish exist, seeking to highlight the "complex and dynamic patterns of bilingualism [that has] existed throughout [Irish] society" (p. 2), departing from the previous, pervasive, obviously false narrative that Irish has ceased to exist after being thoroughly eradicated from society by colonisers who never bothered to learn the language themselves. Further, the authors note that the efforts toward language revitalisation in Ireland, especially that driven by the Revivalist movement in the late 19th and early 20th century, were shaped by people who we would now consider to be new speakers, with the explicit purpose of creating more new speakers, a train of thought that is examined more fully in chapter 3. However, the ideologies of the Revivalists prioritised a Romantic past, which shifted the focus from the remaining speakers of Irish, toward interest in the language itself. This, they argue, risks that the native speaking community will undergo *museification* (Choay, 2011), wherein the relevant communities become museum pieces, rather than real people with real experiences (p. 5). This point, highlighted so early in the text, is a key underlying theme throughout the rest of the analysis. The cruciality of this theme is immediately reinforced, as the authors further critique the historical tendency within the field language revitalisation to focus solely on the decline of the language, specifically pointing to numerous studies in the Irish context which recount the failures of the Irish government in protecting the national language (p. 6). The authors note that few of these studies also make space for people who do not speak Irish natively, or even Irish speakers living outside of the Gaeltacht, even though there are now

more Irish speakers outside of the Gaeltacht than within. This chapter also includes a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that informed their data collection and analytical methods. This included a series of ethnographic interviews, focus groups and participant observation, which took place from 2012-2016. The resulting data was analysed through a biographical and narrative perspective to position how the new speakers saw *themselves*, and their position in the world. This chapter ended with a short biographical account from both authors, discussing what led them to learn Irish, and their own resulting positions as new speakers. This was a lovely choice, which I have never seen in an academic text before, and it served to contextualise the authors' own position within the research in an extremely effective manner.

Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical framework behind the new speaker paradigm. The work the authors have done in developing the paradigm is obvious throughout this chapter. The term 'new speaker' (in English) stems from the Galician *neofalantes* (literally 'new speaker') and the Basque term *euskaldenberri* (literally 'new Basque speaker'), in order to categorise speakers who had learned the respective languages outside of more 'traditional' (intergenerational transmission) means. The concept of the new speaker started taking on the qualities of a discrete analytical category through Bernie's comparative work between Irish and Galician in the early 2010s (p. 19) and has since been adopted into other minoritized language contexts, including but not limited to sign language contexts. The new speaker paradigm developed in response to a pervasive trend within the field of minoritized language revitalisation which stemmed from late 19th century and early 20th century Romantic thinking, which prioritised the speech varieties of native-speaking "NORMS" (non-mobile, older, rural males) (Chambers and Trudgill, 1998: 30). The new speaker paradigm, therefore, rejects the idealisation of the native speaker. In so doing, it also bucks the confines of Fishman's 'reversing language shift' (RLS) model (1991, 2001), which prioritises intergenerational language transmission above all else instead of focusing on other avenues of language maintenance (p. 24). As is the case for any new paradigm, the new speaker framework has been criticised, specifically in terms of the long-term effectiveness of the label. It seems the largest issue stems from when a new speaker stops being "new" (Dewaele, 2018: 237), and the overall usefulness of coining another piece of field-specific jargon (Pavlenko, 2018). The authors, however, argue that the term is pertinent for conceptualising people who have moved beyond casually learning a language, and have instead undergone what Pujolar and Gonzàlez (2013) call a linguistic *muda*, a moment of linguistic change. The term 'new speakers', then, refers to individuals who have taken on another language from the context in which they were raised as a new facet of their personal identities. The fluid conceptualisations of personal identity come

up several times throughout this chapter, and in the rest of the book, as it is arguably the core of the new speaker paradigm, and as the authors argue, the active choice to become a new speaker, rejects traditional "essentialist conception[s] of being" (p. 32) and can instead be understood to be a part of the "reflexive project of the self" (p. 33). A key aspect of new speakerness is the necessity to move beyond the antiquated revitalisation methods proposed by scholars like Fishman who, as the authors argue, relies on heteronormative and patriarchal ideals of a heterosexual family dynamic (Walsh, 2019). The prioritisation of heterosexual families as the locus of language transmission risks falling into the trap of Fishman's ideal "noble and uncontaminated peasant" (1972: 69), which in Ireland restricts Irish language use to a conservative, Catholic perception of identity, which functionally excludes already marginalised LGBTQ families from revitalisation projects (p 34-35). The new speaker framework, therefore, is a departure from "traditional" methods of language revitalisation. A crucial aspect of this is in the allowance of speakers themselves to create their own fluid identities that are not restricted to using minoritized languages in the home and educational domains that have been the previous focus of many previous studies.

Chapter 3 covers the situation of Irish in Ireland, a story many readers of this book may be familiar with. The authors, however, present a fresh take by analysing the history of revitalisation efforts and language policy in Ireland as a means to create new speakers, rather than necessarily supporting existing native speakers. This, they argue, has been the explicit goal of Irish revivalism since the foundation of Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League, in English), who's early goals where characterised by the recruitment of new speakers of Irish in order to achieve the revitalisation goals. However, the lack of retention in the offered language classes led to what the authors call the "ideology of the *cúpla focal*" (literally 'the few words'), in which tokenised, symbolic use of Irish, as opposed to its use as a vernacular, becomes a worthy goal in and of itself (p. 38). The authors also point to an underlying tension, and inherent contradiction within the language policies of the Free State, which fell again into the trap of the Romantic ideals of the early revivalist movement, which was based on the "primacy of the native speaker" while still being entirely reliant on creating new speakers (p. 41). Within this chapter, the authors also discuss the historic conceptualisations of the eras of language policies in Ireland and conclude that, instead of the four-part policy model that has been espoused, especially by Ó Riagáin (1997), can in fact, be collapsed into two – that from the foundation of the Free State in 1922 through the mid-1960s, when governmental support for Irish began to wane, and from the mid-1960s to present (p. 42). A large amount of space in this chapter is dedicated to the Gaeltacht, or the traditionally considered Irish speaking heartland. The subject of the Gaeltacht is fraught in Irish language contexts, as the Revivalists'

perception of the areas in which Irish was still spoken in the early 20th century was that of the "foundation of the nation's essence and the basis for cultural and linguistic legitimacy" (p. 45). It should be no surprise, then, that the Gaeltacht has been the cornerstone of Irish language policy. It is within Gaeltacht policy where Choay's (2011) concept *museification* comes to the fore in the Irish context – scholars who believe that the Gaeltacht is essential for the continued use of Irish push for (Irish) monolingualism in these districts (see, for example Ó Giollagáin et al, 2007) and explicitly put the needs of a narrowly defined concept of a native speaker above those of new speakers (p. 51). The authors do an admirable job in handling this topic, as emotionally loaded as it is for so many people, concluding that the Gaeltacht is still key in the public imagination, however, simplistic geographical and ideological divisions between 'native' Gaeltacht speakers and 'learners' from elsewhere simply is not compatible with the realities of the contemporary sociolinguistic context in Ireland (p. 54). The authors also examine legal and administrative status in the Republic, noting that the symbolic role of Irish as the "national language" has been crucial for public ideologies about the language (p. 54). However, they further note that these ideologies saw no practical translation into matters of meaningful support or initiatives for Irish, nor did Irish speakers have meaningful rights within their society. This led many Irish speakers, new speakers amongst them, to sue the State for the failure of language supports (p. 55). This chapter also discusses the role of Irish in the education system, which is a crucial aspect of revitalisation, as educational policy is among the most robust aspects of language policy in the Republic since independence (p. 57). Relatedly, the authors discuss the issues around Irish language standardisation (p. 62), which although controversial, they conclude is ultimately a helpful tool for complete beginners, who may then seek out more dialectical forms as their competency grows. The authors touch briefly on the situation of Irish in Northern Ireland (p. 64), a topic that can, and has, spanned multiple volumes and still not capture all of the complexities. While Irish speakers have struggled to gain recognition by their government, enclaves of Irish communities have always existed, to the extent that an urban Gaeltacht, 'Shaw's Road Gaeltacht' (*Gaeltacht Bhóthar Seoighe*) was established in west Belfast in 1969, as well as the only Irish-language daily newspaper on the island, *Lá* (literally, day), was established in Belfast in the 1980s (p. 65). Finally, this chapter examines recent policy development, with specific discussion of the (relatively) newly developed Gaeltacht Service Towns and the Irish Language Networks – both being towns and cities outside of the official Gaeltacht boundaries that nevertheless have strong Irish communities and connections (p. 68). While this book is full of necessary commentary on the current state of the field, this chapter in particular should be added to any curriculum discussing the Irish language, and the efforts thus far made toward revitalisation and maintenance.

Chapter 4 introduces the initial analysis, specifically in terms of how individuals become new speakers, drawing from ten interviews, with five men and five women. This chapter is divided into two sections, with John first presenting three men and two women who did have a background in Irish and had a high competency in the language (starting p. 75). Bernie follows this with a section discussing three women and two men with no background in Irish, or connection with the Gaeltacht, but are working on improving their Irish (starting p. 94). The one unifying factor among these ten interviewees stems from their conscious choice to use Irish in their day-to-day lives, and to make efforts to actively engage with the language. However, while some of the respondents did report designing their social environments to accommodate a life lived primarily through Irish, this was not true for everyone. It also struck me that while the respondents reported consistent ideologies regarding the superiority of Gaeltacht Irish, there was an inconsistency in what, for them, constitutes a 'native' speaker. I really appreciated the use of the first-person singular throughout the fieldwork sections, allowing a specific author to take ownership of their own analyses. While this breaks from many academic writing standards, I think it is a valuable addition to social science studies.

Chapter 5 exclusively focuses on fieldwork undertaken by John, and again utilised first person singular pronouns throughout. In this chapter, John draws from five profiles of new speakers of all different backgrounds, all of whom self-report a high level of competence in Irish. This chapter is further divided into sections covering personal identities from primarily Irish speaking identities to those who speak Irish, but still have a primarily English speaking identity. This chapter also draws on John's previous work regarding gay male new speakers of Irish, and the intersection of their linguistic identity and sexuality.[2] Examining identity building in new speakers is crucial in understanding how best to support these communities, however, as John argues, there is no one-size-fits-all descriptor for the personal identities built by new speakers of Irish. While some respondents identify as a 'Gael', rather than 'Éireannach' (Irishman), with its English-speaking implications (p. 120-123), others were happy to align themselves with a standardised variety of Irish that does not have explicit ties to a Gaeltacht dialect. Additionally, these communities hold different perceptions of their identity than people who had grown up in the Gaeltacht, nor do they all particularly want to take on a Gaeltacht identity, especially if they do not have strong familial ties to the Gaeltacht areas. Overall, this chapter stresses that it is absolutely essential to stop gatekeeping new speaker identities, and to create more

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[2]   John notes that he had attempted to find gay women and trans participants but was unable to do so. This is an unfortunate gap in the data, but is no way John's fault, and leaves the potential for someone to expand on his research.

pathways for people to start learning Irish, and start down the path of new speakerness. As John tells us, "It is not practical, nor is it desirable, to bring about a situation where all new speakers have primarily Irish-speaking identities and equal ideological commitment to the language" (p 147). It is essential, therefore, that the overarching narrative regarding Irish-speaking identities must divorce itself from being restricted to an outdated notion of "True Irishness" as performing traditional or Gaeltacht varieties of the language.

Chapter 6 turns to Bernie's fieldwork in a *ciorcal comhrá* [conversation circle] in a village outside of the Gaeltacht that she has called "Cluain Lí" from January to June 2012. This chapter also utilised the first-person singular pronoun within the discussion. In this chapter, she discusses interviews done with people with lower levels of Irish than were historically covered in new speaker profiles, and their perceptions of language ownership. This inclusion is incredibly important, not just within the overall thesis of this book, but within the larger framework of understanding who new speakers are, and the processes individuals undertake to become one. Within this chapter, Bernie also discusses how *ciorcal chomhrá* [conversation circles, pl] can act as 'safe' spaces, akin to Fishman's concept of 'breathing spaces' (1991: 59), a place where people can use their language without judgement or reproach. While participants in the *ciorcal comhrá* in Cluain Lí lacked a strong confidence in Irish and used the informal gatherings in order to improve their language competencies, they were still ideologically committed enough to lobby for their town to be granted Irish Language Network status. It is interesting that the authors elected to use this group in their discussion of language ownership, as in contrast to the more confident speakers discussed by John in chapter 5, the *ciorcal comhrá* participants strongly felt that Irish did not 'belong' to them, but instead looked to the Gaeltacht as the "authentic culture of 'real' Irish speakers" (p. 164), and were disappointed when their experiences within those spaces did not live up to their expectations. Bernie did a fantastic job of linking these explicit ideologies to the wider debates within the field at the moment, and argues that an understanding must be facilitated between native and new speakers, but that the onus is on new speakers to familiarise themselves with the cultural norms within native speaker groups (p. 166-167). This chapter very convincingly argues for the necessity of *ciorcal chomhrá* as a space for long-term benefits for language maintenance efforts, as they provide space for community building among speakers of all proficiency levels.

Finally, in chapter 7, the authors draw together several conclusions from the discussion in the previous chapters. The people highlighted in this book have a wide range of identities and personal relationships to the Irish language – while many of them do remove themselves from the concept of Irish as an ethnonationalist identity, this was not the case for all of them. This is a strength of the book, as it highlights the diversity of new speakers. The authors identify

two crucial narrative threads to inform theoretical insights in the field of Irish language revitalisation efforts. The first is a critique of traditional language revitalisation methods, and the refusal from some parties to modernise their thinking. Second, they propose new conceptual tools with which to "deconstruct ideologies of linguistic identity, monolingualism and nationalism" (p. 172). The new speakers highlighted in this book were a result of language policy, and active efforts to enhance the value of Irish in the linguistic marketplace. Therefore, it follows that the authors also suggest policy implications highlighted by the existence of, and activities undertaken by, new speakers. They suggest a focus on the creation of more safe/breathing spaces for Irish speakers of all levels, coupled with more explicit information regarding how to build networks, and more educational programmes. Furthermore, they again stress that we must move away from only venerating and replicating 'traditional' varieties, perhaps controversially suggesting the revival of the *Lárchanúint* [Central Dialect] that had been developed in the 1980s as an option for learners and potential new speakers who do not feel a strong personal connection to a Gaeltacht. Contrary to some discourse, the authors conclude that new speakers are incredibly concerned about the fate of the Gaeltacht, even if they do not have familial connections to the areas themselves. Finally, the authors argue, quite convincingly, that we must move away from Fishmanian models that prioritise a very narrow conceptualisation of achieving language revitalisation activities through intergenerational transmission at the cost of anything else. Instead, it is necessary to celebrate contemporary Irish-speaking communities, and be realistic about what they actually look like in the period of late-modernity.

Overall, this book was excellent, and a joy to read. However, I do have a couple points I would like to touch on. The first has to do with the use of 'global context' in the title. While the profiles the authors selected did cover a wide variety of ages and backgrounds, there was only one person discussed who originated from outside of Ireland, and he was presented at the very end. Additionally, none of the respondents seem to have come from backgrounds other than (presumably) white, settled Irish families. This omission seems strange on the heels of the Soillse report put together by Bernie and Wilson McLeod (2017) which discusses new speakers of Gaelic who originated from outside of the UK. Thus, it would have been nice to have had truly global perspectives outlined in this book, as it has been widely documented that there are new speakers of Irish with diverse ethnic backgrounds, both inside and out of Ireland. Additionally, and relatedly, it is a shame the authors did not draw out an analysis of the role social media can play as a platform for new speakers. This seemed like a strange oversight, especially as social media sites can act like a *ciorcal comhrá*, and even more presciently as a breathing/safe space (discussed in Belmar and Glass, 2019; Belmar and Heyen, 2021), and were mentioned by two of John's interviewees as

a key aspect of their socialisation in Irish. This highlights an exciting avenue for further research into the social and languaging habits of new speakers.

This book presented a thorough examination of new speakers of Irish, at all levels. It provides wide ranging examples of the ideologies and identities displayed by these speakers, which is then used to provide suggestions for language policies at all levels within Ireland. It is a rare pleasure to read an academic text covering topics of minoritized languages that, instead of declaring nothing more can be done, is full of hope for the future of Irish. The key to this is rooted in the authors' position throughout that language change is not something to fear, but instead something that must be accepted if the goal of widespread intergenerational transmission is to be achieved again. This book is a breath of fresh air in an incredibly complicated field, and will prove to be a very valuable resource for further work done on the subject of new speakers of any language.

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