

CELTIC LANGUAGES IN THE UK IN THE 21st CENTURY

The modern Celtic languages that make up a branch of the Indo-European languages are divided into two subfamilies: the Goidelic (or Gaelic) and the Brythonic (or Brittonic) ones. The Goidelic languages include Irish (Gaeilge), Scottish Gaelic (Gàidhlig) and Manx (Gaelg) from the Isle of Man. While closely related, the modern Goidelic languages are separate languages and are only superficially mutually intelligible. The Brythonic languages include Welsh (Cymraeg), Breton (Brezhoneg) spoken in Brittany (France) and Cornish (Kernewek), from Cornwall. Both Manx and Cornish were revived by second-language learners, with the last native speakers of Manx dead in the 1970s and those of Cornish – in around 1800.

Although the Celtic languages originated in central Europe and spread across vast areas of Europe, they were later replaced by Germanic, Romance, or Slavic languages in most areas. The Continental Celtic languages, such as Gaulish, Hispano-Celtic, and Lepontic, are all extinct. Modern Celtic languages are called Insular and refer to the British Isles. Breton is an Insular Celtic language as it was brought to mainland Europe by immigrants from Britain.

Modern Celtic languages are under pressure from the dominant languages of their nations (English and French) resulting in endangered, lesser-used, or minority status. Nevertheless, they are often a subject of sociolinguistic study due to the impact of ongoing language shift, disuse, and revival. Emigrants created communities outside Europe where their Celtic languages have survived for further generations, particularly Welsh in Patagonia and Scottish Gaelic in Nova Scotia.

The sociolinguistic status of the modern Celtic languages varies a lot. The Irish language, alongside with English, is the state language of the Republic

of Ireland. Welsh, the second official language of the UK, is taught in schools in Wales and has its own mass media. Scottish Gaelic is a more marginal and less widely used language. As for Cornish and Manx, they are largely oral and their existence is still under threat, but the latest decades have shown some signs of revival.

The Irish language has a long and rich history and the oldest vernacular literature of any in Western Europe. It was exported to Scotland and the Isle of Man, whose languages grew up as a variant of Gaelic. While English made significant inroads from the 18th century onwards, Irish was the majority language of the island until the 19th century. It was not until the beginning of the 17th century that the English power was finally consolidated in Ireland, first by military conquest and later by the planting of English-speaking colonists on a much larger scale than before. From this time onward, the decline of Irish began, with Irish becoming the language of an oppressed people. The first census to record the language use was taken in 1851 after the great famine. By this time, the total number of Irish speakers was 1,524,286 (23 percent of the population), but only 319,602 spoke Irish exclusively.

The Gaelic revival began in the early 20th century, spurred on by the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922. Today, Irish has a unique status among the Celtic languages in being the national and first official language of a country – the Republic of Ireland. It is also one of the official languages of the European Union. There are estimated to be around 60–80,000 native speakers – around 10 % of the population of the Republic – concentrated in western and northern counties. However, some 40 % of the population claimed some ability to speak the language in the latest census. Irish is a compulsory subject in all schools that receive public funding and there is a popular Irish language television station. It is a requirement for civil service and some other posts. From 1945 onward, a standard written language has evolved, and there is a small but flourishing literary movement.

At one time almost all of the Scottish population spoke **Gaelic**, which had descended from Irish Gaelic and had been brought to Scotland by Irish settlers. A rich heritage of music and folklore developed over the centuries, despite the suppression of the language from the 18th century in the wake of the Jacobite uprisings and subsequent Highland Clearances. By 1901, there were more than 230 thousand speakers of the language, including 28 thousand who spoke Scottish Gaelic exclusively. The decline has continued steadily. Gaelic is rapidly disappearing from the mainland, though it is holding its ground well in the Hebrides. Scottish Gaelic speakers in the early 1980s numbered about 90,700, which shows that the state of Scottish Gaelic survival is in many ways less serious than that of Irish. Today there are some 60,000 Gaelic speakers in total, around 1 % of the population. It is recognised as a minority language and bilingual signs are appearing throughout Gaelic-speaking areas, particularly in the Highlands and Islands. The language remains at the core of a thriving Gaelic culture that includes music, dance, arts and crafts. Scottish Gaelic is recognised as a minority language in Canada with around 2,000 in Nova Scotia where some 25,000 Scottish Gaelic speakers settled in the 1770s.

Manx is closely related to Irish and Scottish Gaelic. It came to the island in the 4th and 5th centuries AD with Irish monks and traders. By the 15th century, the Isle of Man had come under English administration and with official documentation in Latin or English, Manx remained an unwritten language. The history of the Isle of Man is imperfectly known. Manx was apparently not written until the Welsh bishop John Phillips translated the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* in 1610, using an orthography based on that of English. During the 19th century the decline of Manx was rapid, and the census of 1901 showed only 4,419 speakers of the language, all bilingual. Twenty years later, the language had ceased to be used as a normal means of communication, but investigators have been able to find old people capable of giving useful information. Use of the language continued to decline and the last native speaker died in 1974 bringing the extinction of Manx as a first language. However, like other Celtic languages, the second half of the 20th century saw efforts to revive Manx. The Manx Language Unit was formed in 1992 and a few years later Manx was recognised under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Many schools now teach Manx and adult learning classes are increasingly popular. Nowadays around 1,800 people – just over 2 % of the population – have some ability in the language.

Welsh is one of Europe's oldest living languages. However, when Wales was legally incorporated into England in the mid-16th century, efforts were made to suppress it. Yet as late as the mid-19th century, the vast majority of the population were Welsh speakers. In 1536, the Act of Union deprived Welsh of its official status. By the beginning of the 18th century, the position of the Welsh language had fallen very low, though it was still the vernacular of the vast majority of the people. It was saved by the Methodist revival of the 18th century. The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century first undermined the dominance of Welsh in Wales and by 1901 English speakers outnumbered Welsh speakers for the first time. Most of rural Wales, however, is still Welsh-speaking. It is certainly the most firmly rooted of the modern languages of Celtic origin. In addition, there are still about 8,000 Welsh speakers in parts of Patagonia, Argentina, which was colonized by Welsh settlers in 1865. Wales is officially bilingual with Welsh having equal status to English. The most visible reminder of that fact is that all road signs are in both languages. Estimates for the number of Welsh speakers vary, but a survey by the Office of National Statistics at the end of 2018 showed that 874,000 people are able to speak the language, around 29 % of the population. The language is widely used in the public sector, something that the government is keen to promote.

The Cornish language, a member of the Brythonic group of Celtic languages, was spoken in Cornwall in southwestern Britain and became extinct in the 18th or early 19th century as a result of displacement by English but was revived in the 20th century. Cornish was strongly influenced by English even in medieval times, and later its orthography and vocabulary showed many English elements. By 1600, it was spoken only in the farthest western part of Cornwall,

and by 1800 it had no speakers at all. Modern revivalists constructed a “unified Cornish” in the early 20th century. At the turn of the 21st century the population of Cornish speakers remained small, numbering around 300, but the language showed signs of renewed vigour with the creation of a standard written form in 2008.

Preservation and study of the modern Celtic languages is important in order to reveal their influence over other European languages, the toponymy of certain areas in the UK and the spread of Celtic and other tribes in the world. It can also offer insights into Christianisation of the British Isles and the culture of the Celtic tribes in general.